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Personal Best Women in love

by Linda Williams

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Robert Towne's *PERSONAL BEST* is a film about two women pentathletes who meet at the 1976 Olympic trials, become friends and lovers, then separate and meet again at the 1980 Olympic trials as competitors. Basically a sports movie, it differs from the genre's male pattern of individualist competition in its representation of female athletes, who not only perform their personal best but also support one another in doing so.

The film has been much praised for its realistic representation of athletic female bodies at the moment of concentrated performance, for picturing the wild beauty of young women with the mystic gusto usually reserved for "young men" (Michael Sragow, *Rolling Stone*); for "presenting fresh images on screen ... a special treat" (Gene Siskell, *Chicago Tribune*), and for daring

"with great delicacy and insight, to show a loving sexual relationship between two young women, not as a statement about homosexuality, but as a paradigm of authentic human intimacy" (Jack Kroll, *Newsweek*).[\[1\]](#)

Just about everyone found something to like in the film. Straight women like the "positive" portrayal of (literally) strong female protagonists committed to excellence in their field. Men like the sports subject and the fact that it provides the occasion for the relatively unclothed spectacle of female bodies in competitive contexts that excuse the usual voyeuristic pleasure of the way men look at them. Many (though certainly not all) lesbians like the guilt-free portrayal of a lesbian relationship. Runners of both sexes like the celebration of running itself.

Like most Hollywood films, *PERSONAL BEST* broadly appeals to a wide variety of contemporary social attitudes and tastes. Although the film presents itself as "daring" in its depiction of a sexual relationship between two women, it is not daring enough to delve very far into the

emotional details of that relationship or to suggest that such a relationship could endure. As a result there are many lacunae and motivational puzzlements in the basic narrative. Not the least of these occurs at a point two-thirds of the way through the film when a line of dialogue indicates, much to the audience's surprise, that what has seemed to be a relatively short-term affair has been going on for three years. What may at first appear to be the ineptness of a first-time director is, in fact, a confusion arising from the strain of juggling so many diverging social attitudes into a package that would titillate, but not offend, most viewers. In what follows I would like to examine the qualities for which the film has been most praised — its iconography of physically active, powerful women and its lesbian love theme — in order to discover the ways in which they are contradicted or undercut by predominantly patriarchal attitudes and points of view.

FEMALE ICONOGRAPHY

Many of the discussions of *PERSONAL BEST* have centered on the photography of the track and field sequences. What is somewhat surprising in this discussion is that very often, among the film's relatively few negative reviews, male critics have attacked what they consider to be a voyeuristic presentation of female bodies.^[2] Female critics, however, have tended to defend the film against these very charges. Robert Hatch, for example, writes in *The Nation*:

"During track and field events, the cameras focus obsessively on the women's crotches — most outrageously during a slow-motion passage when six or eight of them practice the high jump by turning back-somersaults over the bar. This is cheesecake; it demeans women, and the lubricious chuckles in the audience suggest that it does so successfully."^[3]

Veronika Geng, however, writing for the *New York Review of Books*, defends these very same shots:

"The idea that (cinematographer Michael Chapman) and Towne are using the camera voyeuristically; and that women must be protected from them by several manly, heroic film critics, is preposterous. Visually, *PERSONAL BEST* is designed around the autonomous movements of the women. When they are still, the camera never prowls their bodies. When they move, they make their own trajectories through the frame. If the camera moves with them, it goes from the general to the specific — from the sources of athletic power, the legs and pelvis, to a particular face. (Pornography looks at a specific woman and then debases her into generalized body parts; with Towne, looking at the body parts makes him fall in love with the whole woman.) In the high jump, the hinge of the movement is the crotch (and too bad if you can't stand seeing it), but each character pushes her entire body into the frame, and the payoff is the unique reaction on her face. Every photographic choice — the distance of the

camera, a change from slow motion to normal speed — is attuned to the women's feelings and picks out the individuality in physical movement."[\[4\]](#)

What Hatch sees as the cheesecake of the unindividuated and fragmented body, Geng sees as the autonomous expression of individuality through movement. Who is right? Or do men and women simply respond differently to the same images?

This issue is a complicated one and I do not pretend to have all the answers. It would be tempting to reply that where men see cheesecake women see autonomous beings. We could thus relegate the entire issue to the "eye of the beholder" who sees what he/she is sexually programmed to see. But if we look closely at Geng's defense of Towne, we will see that she is not at all describing what *her* eye beholds but creating a rather elaborate defense of the male director's point of view — as both creator and consumer of these images. The defense is telling. For I strongly suspect that such images invite women to consume them from a temporarily assumed male point of view. If women could not learn to at least partially assume the male viewpoint in consuming such images, they would experience constant visual displeasure in the bombardment of female body parts provided by the media. Geng reveals the extent to which women have become complicit in the objectification of female bodies.

The assertion that the various fragments of the female body add up to a whole that is attuned to the subjective expression of the woman's feelings might be possible in an innocent world that had not already appropriated female bodies to the measure of male desire. But in the context of our already fallen, patriarchal, world, Eve's body is no longer innocent, no longer her own.

Nor can activity alone constitute the autonomy of the female image. Even the briefest glance at television ads and magazine covers — from *Runner's World* to the *Playboy* issue that features PERSONAL BEST star Mariel Hemingway on the cover and interviews Towne within — reveals the sleek active bodies of an increasingly androgynous feminine ideal displaying the "new cleavage" of ass to leg. From the breast fetishes of the fifties we move to the ass, crotch and muscle fetishes of the eighties. At this point in time, when commercials have already fetishized the fragmented female body to sell the most mundane commodities, analytic slow motion montages of athletic bodies in motion merely confirm the current style of fashionably fetishized female bodies constructed to the measure of male desire. Where that desire once consigned women to a passive voluptuousness, it now represents them as so many trained seals flexing their muscles to male awe and approval. Thus even Jane Fonda finds herself, in *ON GOLDEN POND*, obliged to perform a muscle-flexing backflip to resolve the father-daughter differences of that film, thereby proving to her father Henry in one of the least satisfying plot resolutions ever concocted — that she is really just as good as the son he always wanted her to be.

The point, however, is not to berate Geng for an "unliberated" enjoyment of female bodies. Women viewers, traditionally deprived of active women characters with whom they can identify, are naturally inclined to celebrate any female images that break out — however slightly — of the traditional molds of passive and decorous objects. (I recently found myself applauding Lauren Bacall's graceful ability to catch the matchbox Humphrey Bogart tosses her in *TO HAVE AND HAVE NOT*, even though the vast majority of tier movements are self-consciously and narcissistically calculated to please both Bogart and the male viewer.)

The question then arises: what would a nonpatriarchal representation of the athletic female body be? There is no answer that works for all time. In 1982 a slow-motion analysis of female athletes will be read in the context of the patriarchy's commercial and sexual appropriation of those very same images. It could very well be that what we need at this point in time is to restore the integrity of the whole body in real time and space.^[5] Even the *WIDE WORLD OF SPORTS* allows all athletes this much integrity before launching into the slow-motion replay.

WOMEN IN LOVE

PERSONAL BEST's other claim to originality is the lesbian relationship between its two female characters. Here the film makes more explicit a female love relationship that was hinted at in *JULIA*, the last decade's enormously popular epic of female friendship and love. In *PERSONAL BEST* the track and field sports context of the narrative permits an emphasis on the physical and sensual that renders the women's erotic relationship a natural by-product of their highly physical existence. This, I think, is the source of the almost overwhelming acceptance of the film's treatment of the normally taboo subject of homosexual love.

In box office terms, the combination of sports and sex was a stroke of genius. Those who would normally be shocked or at least irritated by a lesbian relationship in any other context find it quite "natural" among female athletes who, it is presumed, are simply more physical than other people. The film thus capitalizes on public awareness of, and curiosity about, lesbian athletes like Billy Jean King while evading any real presentation of lesbian identity. Thus Kroll, in the statement quoted above, can take Chris and Tory's relationship not as a "statement about homosexuality but as a paradigm of authentic human intimacy." Authenticity for Kroll seems to consist of avoiding the very issues of sexual identity that the lesbian relationship raises. My own criticism of *PERSONAL BEST* is not that it should have made a "statement about homosexuality," but that in studiously avoiding even mentioning the *word* lesbian — let alone the word love — the film's notion of "authentic human intimacy" tends to reduce this relationship to a kind of pre-verbal and pre-oedipal regression to narcissism.

The first lovemaking scene between the two athletes, Chris and Troy (Mariel Hemingway and Patrice Donnelly), occurs early in the film. It is presented as the outgrowth of a prolonged and herculean arm-wrestling

contest whose ups and downs prefigure the various ups and downs of the two women's competitive careers. Only the physicality of the arm-wrestling and the proximity of the two remarkably fit and beautiful bodies prepare us for their sudden passion. In the very next scene, they celebrate their love in an ecstatic workout run along the beach. A three-year love affair follows.

What we see of this affair is somewhat confusing. At times it is presented as an idyll of sensuality; at other times it seems tense and troubled. The two women both live and train together. Under Tory's guidance, Chris at first gains confidence and skill. But as Chris improves, Tory begins to decline. A key moment in their relationship occurs at the Pan Am Games in Colombia. When Chris becomes ill with stomach cramps, Tory spends the night nursing her, cradling her in her arms on the floor of a dressing room shower in a pose that recalls that of a madonna and child. The next day Chris is well and performs magnificently while Troy is tired and does poorly. Although Chris clings desperately to the maternal care and support that Tory gives her, it becomes increasingly obvious that she performs best under adverse conditions and needs not to depend on Tory. As Chris's skills improve, she reluctantly begins to challenge Tory in the pentathlon. Tory seems able to accept this challenge and still love Chris, but her concern for Chris's well-being tends to hurt her own performance.

The real problem, however, is not that they must compete with one another but that they must do so within the context of a personal relationship of unequals. For Tory's relationship to Chris, as the madonna and child scene in the shower clearly suggests, is that of a mother. This mothering is the real impediment to the growth and endurance of their relationship. Yet this mothering also renders the relationship safe in the eyes of the film's ultimately patriarchal system of values. The film can afford to celebrate nostalgically the sensual lost Eden of a female-to-female bond precisely because it chooses to depict this bond as the non-viable pre-oedipal dependence and narcissistic identification of mother and daughter.

Chris and Tory's love affair is doomed not because they are lesbians, the film seems to say, but because of the regressive nature of their narcissistic relation. The failure to define the lesbian nature of their relationship as anything other than a regression to mother-daughter narcissism is one of the major disappointments of the film. The remarkable fact that the film goes to great lengths to avoid giving a name to the lesbian nature of Chris and Tory's relationship indicates the extent of the evasion.

The closest the film comes to defining their relationship is Tory's statement: "We may be friends, but every once in a while, we fuck each other." The definition of a three-year love affair as friendship plus occasional sex seems hopelessly inadequate. The very language of the formulation "fuck each other" assumes an oppressively phallic model for its sexual content. If ever two people had a chance *not* to fuck each other

(with all the manipulation and abuse the term implies), it would be these two women.

In other words, we find in PERSONAL BEST what we have so often found in the action films of male bonding: a gratuitous and decorative love interest with no organic relation to the real concerns of the film. Chris and Tory's love remains an emotional and sexual interlude in a larger configuration that cannot deal with its implications. Thus, having put the two women together, the film must then find a way to drive them apart.

If Chris and Tory were driven apart by the pressures of competing in a patriarchal system of ruthless competition, then we could clearly blame this system and celebrate the women's triumph over it in the end. But what actually drives them apart is a blatantly contrived scene in which Tory accidentally moves a marker that causes Chris an injury. Because neither of the women can account for the accident, the coach can drive a wedge of suspicion between them. Although we deplore the evil suspicions of the macho coach, the melodramatic contrivance of the unlikely accident actually effects the separation. The coach is ultimately proven wrong in his suspicions and in his ruthless handling of the two women, but nothing in the film proves wrong their contrived separation. Quite the contrary. From this point on, the film shifts focus (from Chris and Tory to Chris alone) and tone (from serious melodrama to comic relief) as it recounts Chris's initiation into the joys of adult heterosexuality.

Another evasion of the lesbian theme occurs in the contradictory presentation of Tory, played by the novice actress and former hurdler Patrice Donnelly. Although Tory looks and acts a good ten years older than Chris, she appears in a role that would make her roughly Chris's contemporary. Similarly, although provided with an ex-boyfriend (mentioned briefly) and no previous experience with other women, she is visually coded — short hair, square features, tailored jackets — to look the part of the "dyke" in opposition to Mariel Hemingway's more feminine long hair, unassertive presence, and general girlishness. Tory takes the initiative in their first sexual encounter, appears jealous of Chris when she is in the company of men, and, after they separate, seems to lurk in the background of Chris's life, a frustrated lesbian.

The film thus delivers a double message: on the one hand it presents two heterosexual women who "simply" fall into an affair without examining the meaning of their relationship; on the other hand, it indirectly implies that one of them is older, more experienced and a "real" lesbian. The fact that Tory is almost completely dropped as a character after she and Chris separate suggests that Hollywood has not entirely given up the old policy of punishing the homosexuals in its stories. Instead of death or suicide, the punishment has simply been reduced to narrative banishment.

The repression of the lesbian woman-identified content of Chris and Tory's relationship is all the more remarkable given the film's ostensible

moral: that women athletes can be both tough and compassionate, that the "killer instinct" that motivates male competition, and that is advocated by their coach, can be tempered with a female ethic of support and cooperation, which is not only good for the soul but can also win in the end. In other words, the film asserts on the level of its sports theme what it is afraid to assert on the level of its sexual theme.

By the end of the film Chris, who began as a whiny little girl in terror first of her father then of her male coach, finds the strength to oppose her coach's order not to associate with Tory. At the climactic meet she helps Tory win a crucial event by taking out the competition too fast. The plan works, cooperation in competition prevails, and both women qualify for the Olympic team, which never went to Moscow, with the satisfaction that they have performed their "personal best." But the personal best of competitive sports has here clearly supplanted the personal best of relationship. Again, what the film offers on the level of its sports theme — that women can be competitors with a positive difference — it takes away on the level of its sexual theme — that they can also be lovers with a positive difference.

The shift in tone is quite remarkable. Chris achieves her rite of passage under the tutelage of Denny, an ex-swimmer whose ingratiating buffoonery comes as a literal relief to the emotional intensity of the Chris/Tory relationship. Denny functions as a modified and reasonable substitute for the excessive and unreasonable patriarchal authority of Chris's father and coach. It is Denny who delivers the final moral of the film's title, "The only ass you need to whip is your own." And it is Denny whose (full frontal but briefly spied) penis becomes the final symbol of Chris's delighted reconciliation with patriarchy: a comic scene in which Denny goes to the toilet accompanied by a curious and enthusiastic Chris who stands behind him to "hold it."

In this scene what appears on the surface to be a clever role reversal — woman objectifying and fetishizing a male body part — is really a not very subtle comic expression of Chris' embrace of a newly found adult heterosexuality. Chris' maturity is then found in the next scene when she defies her coach to befriend the now weakened and child-like Tory. Although Chris's support of Tory prepares the "happy end" of both women's mutual triumph in the final meet, the moral is clear: Chris's strength and maturity derive not from Tory, who mothered her, but from Denny whose laidback fathering has finally made her a woman.

And so, what began as a promising depiction of women in love and competition becomes a series of dirty phallic jokes whose function is to dispel the seriousness and tension of the original woman-to-woman relation: "What's gotten into you?" says one of Chris's friends, and Chris, in dreamy reply, simply looks at Denny.

If the phallus has become a running joke throughout the film, first for its absence and then later (with a vengeance) for its presence, it never really becomes the butt of the joke; everything is ultimately envisioned from its point of view. Denny's function in the film makes this painfully clear.

If we have had any early doubts about the voyeuristic presentation of women's bodies in the first half of the film, Denny's bugged-eyed appreciation of Chris's body must dispel them. His comic, knee-jerk reactions to Chris's athletic beauty stand for the pleasures of the male viewer who is "wowed" by the power and beauty of the newly streamlined feminine ideal. Scenes in which he bumps his head on the side of a pool as punishment for too much underwater looking, or does bench presses while blowing air up Chris's crotch are pure burlesque, and like all burlesque, these gestures render the involuntary male sexual response comically forgivable.

The women in *PERSONAL BEST* do not define for themselves the challenge their relationship poses to patriarchy. This allows the film to recuperate their (unnamed) sensual pleasure into its own regime of voyeurism. Ultimately, the many nude scenes and crotch-shots can be enjoyed much the way the lesbian turn-ons of traditional heterosexual pornography are enjoyed — as so much titillation before the penis makes its grand entrance. For all its lyrically natural and guiltless sensuality, for all its celebration of women athletes as possessed of both excellence and integrity, *PERSONAL BEST* fails to provide a genuinely feminist depiction of women in love or competition.

Notes

I would like to thank Judy Gardiner, Richard Gardiner, Meg Halsey, Kathy Minogue, Michelle Citron, Julia Lesage and Chuck Kleinhans for either contributing their own valuable ideas on this film or for helping me to clarify my own ideas.

[1.](#) These statements are gleaned from the current newspaper ad for the film.

[2.](#) Male critics who deplore the film's voyeurism include: Vincent Canby in the *New York Times*, Carlos Clarens in *The Soho News*, Robert Hatch in *The Nation*, and Dave Kerr in *The Chicago Reader*. Female critics who defend the film's presentation of the female body include: Barbara Presley Nobel in *In These Times*, Pauline Kael in *The New Yorker*, and Veronika Geng in *The New York Review of Books*. Of course, many male critics have also praised the film extravagantly, as demonstrated by the excerpts quoted above. But it does seem significant, that among the male critics who dislike the film, so many of them isolate the issue of voyeurism as an important element of their criticism and that, similarly, female critics feel obliged to defend the film on this very issue. I have not conducted a survey of the gay and lesbian and feminist press; opinion on the film appears to be somewhat divided in it.

[3.](#) *The Nation*. February 27, 1982, pp. 251-252.

[4.](#) March 18, 1982, p. 45.

[5.](#) This is, in fact, what a great many current feminist filmmakers have chosen to do. See, for example, the films of Chantal Akerman,

Marguerite Duras, Yvonne Rainer, Michelle Citron, Helke Sander and
Ulrike Ottinger.

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On Golden Pond

The backflip as cultural solution

by Deborah H. Holdstein

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As entertainment and as problem film, ON GOLDEN POND comes as somewhat of a surprise. And it argues well for Hollywood-formulaic entertainment value. Mark Rydell's film, adapted by author Ernest Thompson from his play, insures success by casting Katherine Hepburn and Henry Fonda as a loving couple in the twilight of their years. The three Oscars awarded the film — for Hepburn and Henry Fonda as best actress and actor, and for Thompson for best adaptation — reinforce its emotional value, already underscored by the connotative power of a Hepburn-Fonda pairing.

The film offers audiences several important contemporary themes: the difficulties of growing old, the bonds between woman and man, the difficulties of being someone's child (someone's daughter, especially), and the difficulties of being someone in your own right and retaining that dignity throughout life. Admittedly, these are all things that any audience "can relate to," and easily. However, while the film poses these questions, it stubbornly refuses to treat them with the depth or integrity they merit. The answers remain convenient, stereotyped, and simplistic.

The hackneyed visual metaphor of sunset over a Golden Pond, revived by breathtakingly beautiful birds-eye pans of beautiful New England scenery, reinforces the inevitable sentiment of the film. The context of that sentiment comes from the filmmaker's reliance on the well-publicized problems between Henry Fonda and his son and daughter, the plight of that deserving yet only now rewarded actor who had never won an Oscar, and the well-wrought image of Katharine Hepburn in spunky roles. Audience members may have their expectations formed before they've actually seen the film. In that sense, perhaps we're expected to fill in any developmental flaws regarding theme and characterization with what we already know — that is, to appreciate the resonance of real-life relationships and personalities.

ON GOLDEN POND opens with appropriately somber, "educated"

music, underscoring our protagonists' nature: educated, witty, affluent. The hymnlike theme accompanies fine, godlike pans over the beautiful water and natural life of rustic New England. Rydell's insistence on this panoramic splendor courts our recognition of this as the characteristically appropriate place where a crusty, old, celebrated college professor and his devoted wife would "go summering." As the couple drives up the path to their cottage, the car seems almost an intrusion. The use of nature in this film reinforces our sense of the main characters privileged status. The water's lovely loons and fish become the admirable objects around which the story revolves, around which Hepburn and Fonda captain their several boats. For they have enough privilege in old age to support the time and leisure for learning more of "life's inner meaning," hardly *reality* for most other Americans.

Rydell uses extreme high angle and bird's eye shots to advantage in maintaining an illusion of characters immersed in their surroundings. Rather than make our characters appear vulnerable, though vulnerable at times they are, the technique instead integrates them with their environment. Rydell attempts to suggest visually as well as through situation that Hepburn and Fonda are somehow "in their element," that they are as realistic as the natural beauty surrounding them.

But more importantly, the film notes how and why the characters interact with one another and integrate into the environment as they do. The film contrasts male senility (and one's fear of it) with female strength, forcing us to confront role reversals and their consequences, especially where women are concerned. Hepburn lives up to an active ideal, a predictably devoted, yet free spirited wife; she acts "cool" — goes singing into the woods to herself, and all. It is she who hauls in the firewood, ventures out into the woods for strawberry and flower-picking, and is at the controls of the powerboat as she and Fonda do the errands. Henry Fonda, on the other hand, purposefully the curmudgeon, "bahs" and "humbugs" his way through most of the film, bemoaning his enforced leisure and facing the terror of a shaky memory and physical uncertainty. He especially tries to mask his inability to "like" his daughter — and his defensiveness about her presumed unwillingness to like him.

In *ON GOLDEN POND*, however, only older women have the dignity befitting women; Henry Fonda has become completely dependent upon Hepburn. She acts as his mouthpiece, his oral historian, so to speak. She interprets him, explains him away for people. She stands as his fence in the real, potentially hostile world. Information from a letter to her parents — about a divorce, several boyfriends, her father's negative responses to information about her — leads us to perceive Jane Fonda as their *neurotic* daughter, Chelsea. In part through merciless interrogation from her father over her rented car's make (she doesn't remember, and that certainly doesn't help in gaining anyone's esteem), she seems frivolous because she has not reconciled her horrible relationship with him. Her only dignity appears to be her sexy, bikini-perfect body ("Doesn't Jane Fonda look great at 42?"), instead of any

mature attempt on her part to initiate reconciliation or face her emotional problems squarely.

Early in the film, the Fonda-Fonda conflict comes to us not with gentle hinting, but with fierce bludgeoning. As Hepburn and Henry Fonda arrive for another summer, he putters about, checking the telephone, accusing the operator of having called him (classic "Exhibit A memory loss"). He notices an old picture of himself and Hepburn with a young child. "Who IS that?" he mutters. Within the first five or ten minutes of the picture, even *we* know that Chelsea appears in the photograph. The dialogue provides our first major piece of contextual information to prepare us for father and daughter's generally unpleasant confrontation. And throughout these early sequences, we learn the serious consequences of retirement. Fonda senses that he has control of his life only when he can boss people around. The friendly mailman, a kind, passive sort, becomes one of Fonda's favorite victims. Fonda's foray to the outdoors fails, as he can no longer remember the way to the Old Town Road for berries. The man, here, reduced by old age and retirement to assuming the womanly, dependent role, finds nagging his only recourse for status and control. Our response is of course to be sympathetic, to bemoan his "lost power." In a woman, these traits would damn her, as they are unforgivable, "classic."

Part of the role reversal, however, is role affirmation. That is, Hepburn still retains firm control of the environment that has been her life: her home, her husband. Consequently, she remains vital, has, in effect, "lost less" or nothing at all because her commerce between her world and the outside — as a wife — still exists as before. She's wise, warm, "permissive," as her husband puts it. When daughter Chelsea comes home, Hepburn's "mommy" sharply contrasts with Henry Fonda's "Norman." And it appears that the older Hollywood woman can retain her dignity these days (remember the Davis-Crawford caricature in *WHATEVER HAPPENED TO BABY JANE?*) because in *ON GOLDEN POND*, Hepburn has been a devoted wife and — we assume — mother. She has limited her interactions to the intellectual spheres allowed a good faculty wife. But our image of the younger woman is one of a person who has not come to terms with her life and herself. Jane Fonda/Chelsea has a failed marriage behind her. Although she has a career of sorts (one hinted at), only for marrying her boyfriend-dentist do her parents reward her with praise. They're happy for her, as Chelsea herself puts it, because her marrying shows she's "finally gotten her life together." Simple solution #1.

And Chelsea's role and conflicts fare even less well in the film's narrative solution. As for her neuroses — Chelsea's years-long battle with her father's coldness, his inattention — well, all she needs is a good "talking to." Hepburn's wise words, which in effect warn Fonda the younger to simply "grow up" and forget the past, work magic! By the end of the film, father and daughter have a three-minute conversation in which all is reconciled. Simple solution #2. Yet these simplicities reveal a more crucial ideological issue: this film shows the boy-child as being far more

desired, important, and valued than the girl-child. When Chelsea's fiancé's son, thirteen-year-old Billy, is “dumped” at the house while the young couple head for Europe, the elder Fonda finds the companionship, understanding, and kinetic relationship possible only between a man and his son or grandson — as the film would have us believe.

Chelsea can't quite make it as a daughter, and has had limited success as a “son.” Throughout, we perceive her as being inadequate for not having been the “pal” Fonda wanted. Though she is quite an athlete (translate “tomboy”), to be a pal to dad one must be a boy. In fact, all of the serious family problems and difficulties raised by the film are apparently solved when at the end Chelsea achieves the ultimate rite of passage. Now middle-aged, she wins her father's admiration by tackling the back flip, a dive that had stymied her in her youth and that still scared her as an adult. Chelsea's passage allows us somehow to think that she's now “regular” enough, “boyishly” tough enough, to be OK. With analysis, this scene smacks of the high school fraternity initiation: “You'll like me now, dad, and this oughta *really* do it.” Even when everybody's various neuroses are apparently reconciled, Chelsea/Fonda's mode of reconciliation comes from a childish, “I can do it” form of attention. And she gets it.

Years ago, Jean-Paul Sartre, in his novel *Nausea*, condemned his own characters for narrowly following stereotypes. That is, men were conditioned to seek adventure, to take risks. Women, on the contrary, sought only perfect, static moments. These modes of being become reversed in *ON GOLDEN POND*. During pivotal scenes in the middle of the film, when Chelsea and her fiancé come back to visit, Henry Fonda holds court in the house, having his turn with each major character of the film who comes into talk with him, except Chelsea. Hepburn, however, is out in the water — predictably skinny-dipping.

And the contrast of home/safety vs. outdoors/adventure parallels Hepburn's strengths and her husband's weaknesses. The traits become confused in Chelsea, an indecisive, whiny child-woman, because of her sense that a boy would have been the preferred, better-treated child. Where her father *was* socially useful and her mother still is, Fonda seems useless, unable to confront her family problems: “When I'm in Los Angeles, I'm in control, but when I'm here, I'm always answering to him.” She's just not good enough, it seems. Only with young Billy does Henry Fonda have his adventures again. But even they have a boating accident. It's mommy/ Hepburn who impetuously dives from her friend's cruising patrol boat to save them.

ON GOLDEN POND touches on the tragic events of life as it passes, as death becomes reality. But it also deals in a complex type of sexism against both woman and man. Henry Fonda's inability to deal with increasing age and his feeling of uselessness depict a real and important issue. Yet his carping, “womanish” coping mechanisms belittle him, make him “less than a *man*.” And only Hepburn appears capable of

resolving, of interpreting these mechanisms, which derive from an elderly man's resentment at his powerlessness. Only she can justify the defenses — and the man — to a world which, mocking, has ceased to really care.

But the women in the film are allowed strength only when they have lived long enough to have proved themselves beautiful, tough old birds within the confines of acceptability — marriage and devotion to home. Rather than admire the honesty within Henry Fonda's dependence, we're to feel sorry for him. Rather than merely *admire* Hepburn's agility and physical and mental strength, her abilities provide some of the greatest "laughs" in the film. After all women aren't *supposed* to act that way, and she's therefore an anomaly. (And when the characters mention with admiration the age, 97, of a woman in town who's just died, Henry Fonda caustically replies that she was a "lesbian, anyway." Aside from the woman he depends on, he has to degrade long life and strength in a woman — it must make men look bad.)

As for Jane Fonda, she's now "gotten her life together" through the communion of the instant family — her dentist and his son. And still the film falsely communicates the notion that simplistic "talkings-to" are enough for a mother and daughter to straighten things out, instead of suggesting the strength, abilities, and life-force that women can and do give their daughters. If the Hepburn character were as realistic as the rustic setting, then one would believe that she'd have done that all along. ON GOLDEN POND fails when it reinforces the sexism that forces woman to be strong at the expense or degradation of man, the sexism that prohibits the reasonable legacy of strength and commitment to life that a woman can impart to other women, not just to their men.

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La Cage aux Folles 2 The inversion of laughter

by Carolyn A. Durham

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LA CAGE AUX FOLLES' (1979) remarkable success has been newly consecrated by the release of a sequel, a sign all the more significant since follow-up films are not yet standard practice in France. Because LA CAGE AUX FOLLES II does not begin to equal the original in coherence or in comedy, it more readily reveals the ideological substructure that supports both films. And so it invites us to examine what lies behind our willingness to laugh. LA CAGE AUX FOLLES may well conceal truly homophobic attitudes, as some critics have at least suspected. However, these are sustained in turn by a form of gynophobia, even more fundamental to the film, which allows a male-oriented culture, whether homosexual or heterosexual, to find the film "screamingly funny" (Lawrence O'Toole, *Maclean's*, 6 Aug. 1979, p. 44).

LA CAGE AUX FOLLES begins with a metaphor: a shot of the audience — middle class, heterosexual, and above all, liberal. They frequent the Saint-Tropez nightclub, where the film is set, to watch the transvestite shows staged by homosexual performers. The audience on camera represents by interior duplication the general public for sophisticated French comedies about homosexuality, and more specifically if less deliberately, the usual U.S. public for subtitled foreign films. In both cases, there seems to be a discrepancy of ideals and values between the performer and the spectator: between the homosexual transvestite and the heterosexual couple, between the film LA CAGE AUX FOLLES and the public who appreciates it.

In fact, the film appropriately deems this particular audience sufficiently important to reproduce it on camera in a priority role. The nightclub audience appears in the opening and closing scenes of LA CAGE AUX FOLLES, and thus it functions as a central framing device. The complicity between the film and its straight audience turns out to be one of director Edouard Molinaro's primary subjects. Although gay reviewers of LA CAGE AUX FOLLES have paid careful attention to the important issue of audience response, I fear they are mistaken in

thinking that the straight spectators around them misread the film or laugh in the wrong places (see Gerald Hannon, *The Body Politic*, Sept. 1979, p. 34, and Vito Russo, *New York Native*, p. 22). LA CAGE AUX FOLLES serves not to challenge but to reinforce popular conventions; and such is, in major part, the film's ideology.

We need hardly expect a commercially successful film in 1979-81 to present a favorable picture of homosexuals and to encourage understanding or even tolerance in its audience. Yet, some reviewers of LA CAGE AUX FOLLES have bent over backward to interpret the film in this light. They justify their own favorable commentaries by an insistence on the experience of the main characters Renato and Albin (played by Ugo Tognazzi and Michael Serrault) as generic. *Time's* Richard Schickel reads the film's portrayal of gay experience as a comforting assurance that anyone can manage:

"Though the gays must make eccentric adjustments to the exigencies of living, their behavior is viewed as no more unusual than the quirks everyone develops to get through the day as pleasantly as possible." (20 Aug. 1979, p. 58).

Maclean's O'Toole compares Renato's and Albin's disguises to those "we all attempt" out of insecurity, self-defense or concern for reputation. Certainly Molinaro's film adopts the perspective of its two central characters, both gay. But this point of view does not imply any acceptance of their situation as representative of the human condition nor even any belief in its resemblance to that of actual homosexuals.

Rather, the identification established with Renato and Albin allows a ready defense to offer to those who question a willingness to laugh at gays. It gives the straight, liberal spectators at whom the film is aimed both the confidence that they are laughing *with* and not at the homosexuals of LA CAGE AUX FOLLES. They can have the conviction that the film makes fun of everyone, not just of gays. Indeed, the audience buys its right to laugh at gays by agreeing to laugh first at the bourgeoisie, that is, at itself. Because the spectators mock those who are their own representatives within the film, the Charrier family, they escape personal implication. At the same time, LA CAGE AUX FOLLES presents viewers with a comforting stereotypical portrayal of homosexuals that reinforces many people's deepest convictions. The film permits them to continue to believe that gays are what they really thought they were all the time.

It may be useful at this point to recall briefly the central action of LA CAGE AUX FOLLES. Renato and Albin own the Saint-Tropez nightclub of the film title in which Albin performs as a transvestite singer. As they are about to celebrate their twentieth year as lovers, Renato's son Laurent (Remy Laurent) arrives to announce his engagement to the daughter of Charrier (Michel Galabru), secretary of the ultra-conservative "Union for Moral Order." Laurent insists that during an impending get-acquainted visit from the Charrier family, Renato must send Albin away, get their maid Jacob out of drag, and transform

himself into a straight diplomat. This proposal provokes anger and hurt in Albin, whose jealousy is further aroused by Renato's decision to re-establish contact with Laurent's mother Simone (Claire Maurier) in an effort to provide Laurent with a traditional family structure. When Simone is delayed, however, Albin takes her place at dinner. The ensuing complications lead predictably to the exposure of Renato and Albin as gays. Fortunately for the young lovers, Charrier compromises his own reputation as well; harassed by reporters, he must dress in drag to escape from the nightclub. Thus the film can end happily with the marriage of Laurent and his fiancée.

Perhaps the most serious symptom of Molinaro's ambivalence about homosexuality, and the only one of immediate interest here, is making a film that implicitly advocates heterosexuality. Renato offers only the briefest defense of the lifestyle he has chosen, a single sentence asserting his own self-identity, before totally acquiescing to Laurent's plan of disguise, denial and deception. Albin's jealousy of Laurent's mother Simone proves, moreover, extremely well justified. At their first meeting some years past, Renato and Simone conceived Laurent. At their second encounter, they are well on their way to having sexual relations again when Albin's sudden intrusion in Simone's office prevents the actual consummation. Albin's reaction — "Every time you're with that woman, the same thing happens" — sums up the situation precisely. Renato's objection that it has only occurred twice in twenty years is irrelevant. What counts is the rigorous consistency of the pattern and not the number of times it is repeated.

LA CAGE AUX FOLLES delivers an absolutely clear message: Renato's instincts are heterosexual. Each time he encounters Simone, he desires her, attracts her easily and strongly, and immediately acts on his passion. If Renato lives with Albin as a homosexual, we must therefore believe that it is only because he has not had ready access to the "right" woman. This determination to undermine Renato's chosen erotic identity may well explain the total absence of (homo)sexuality that gay critics have consistently noted in LA CAGE AUX FOLLES and its sequel (see, for example, Jack Babuscio, *Gay News* 212). Renato's son Laurent, representative of the next generation, chooses heterosexuality openly. Renato and Albin specifically sacrifice their homosexual life style to Laurent's happiness so that the film may end with a wedding, the celebration *par excellence* of the institution of heterosexuality.

How then can we explain the lack of a gay outcry at the release and the subsequent popularity of LA CAGE AUX FOLLES? Certainly the recent response to CRUISING proves the possibility of an openly hostile reaction to films viewed as harmful to the gay community. Some critics find gays themselves responsible for the success of LA CAGE AUX FOLLES (Michel Alain, *Attitude*, July 1979, p. 15. In general, despite reservations and ambivalence, the gay press reveals close to unanimous support for the original film and even admits periodically to a certain fondness for the sequel. Justifications vary widely, ranging from politically unreflective (but no less irresistible) laughter (Roger Frye,

Gay Community News, 28 March, 1981) to conscious political solidarity with the effeminate males portrayed by Renato and Albin (*The Body Politic*). Moreover, the almost total absence of gays on screen — particularly in leading roles, in predominantly sympathetic portrayals, and in commercially successful films — may suffice in itself to explain the generally favorable gay response to *LA CAGE AUX FOLLES*.

Apparently straight critics are no better positioned to raise questions in the name of gays. Not surprisingly, *The Village Voice* (Tom Allen, 14 May, 1979, p. 50) pans *LA CAGE AUX FOLLES* as an unfit vehicle for a gay statement, but only in passing. *The Nation's* Robert Hatch (1 May, 1979, p. 581) continues to defend the film as "wholesome" even as he recognizes that those directly implicated may not be in a position to concur:

"*LA CAGE AUX FOLLES* capitalizes on the kind of hysterical exhibitionism that serious minded homosexuals repudiate. The film is funny enough, if you're not in the line of fire, but I'm not prepared to say that the film is entirely harmless."

Hatch's statement would be more readily applicable to the Jean Poiret play on which the film is based and which indeed takes homosexuality as its central subject. Consequently, the play includes an internal criticism of Jacob's and Albin's behavior in such accusations as that of Georges, the Renato character in the play: "You're practicing infantile homosexuality." (Paris: Presses Pocket, 1979, p. 79).

But the film version of *LA CAGE AUX FOLLES* is not really about homosexuality at all. The standard sex roles played by the "husband" Renato and the "wife" Albin permit this apparent nonconformist couple to be subsumed in the heterosexual norm, which the film generally advocates. Moreover, the plot makes women the authentic, if covert, subject of attack. On the one hand, the laughter of straight spectators at the conservative Charrier family produces a self-chastisement that frees them to retain their prejudices against gays. On the other, the underlying mockery of women achieves an even more important catharsis that permits all laughter at males, homosexual or heterosexual, ultimately to pass as harmless.

The primary focus of laughter in the film is Albin, the "female" homosexual whose identification as woman can be glimpsed in the adjectives straight reviewers select to describe him: "outrageously bitchy" and "hysterical" (*Newsweek*); "a menopausal hysteric" (*Time*). Before Albin actually appears on screen, Renato identifies him as female — "I'll kill *her*." Albin's behavior in his first scene offers a paradigm of stereotypical female behavior, a complete catalogue of conventional female flaws as men have defined them. Before entering our field of vision, Albin throws an object that shatters a mirror: women are temperamental and destructive. In exasperation, Renato calls the doctor: women are ill. The doctor speaks baby talk to Albin: women are children. Albin suffers from depression and apathy, classic female disorders, and expresses a wish to die. Thus he manages to illustrate

both female passivity and over-dramatization at the same time. In the midst of an outburst of complaints and laments, Albin, suddenly distracted by the doctor's interrupted dinner, begins to discuss cooking: women are capricious and, ultimately, domestic. Offered a new supply of tranquilizers, Albin produces dozens of them (which he swallows at regular intervals throughout *LA CAGE AUX FOLLES* and its sequel): women are hysterical. Even after the doctor's departure, Albin still fails to prepare for his nightclub number, an event that obviously repeats itself nightly: women are always late; women have no sense of responsibility.

Importantly, Molinaro does not simply portray Albin as the tyrannical and spoiled *prima donna*, as often male as female, which he originally incarnated in Jean Poiret's play. Should any doubt remain about the precise nature of the stereotype held up as a target for our laughter, Albin becomes finally the typical shrewish wife, vain and unreasonable. He accuses Renato of having failed to appreciate his recent weight loss, of not noticing his new outfit, of spending less time with him. Such "facts" lead Albin to a traditionally female series of accusations: you're neglecting me, you're taking me for granted, you don't love me anymore, you're cheating on me. At the end of his outburst, Albin encourages Renato to hit him, a wish that is satisfied as the sudden cut to a new scene produces a humming Albin, in costume, ready to descend to the stage. This final male message is as clear as it is destructive. Not only does violence against women keep them in their places, they like it; in fact, they ask for it. Certainly, *LA CAGE AUX FOLLES* is not the first film to preach such a dangerous doctrine. But the message proves no less threatening for being concealed in a light-hearted comedy (apparently) about homosexuals.

With the visit of the Charrier family imminent, Renato must get rid of Albin to pull off successfully the masquerade Laurent seeks; as usual, a woman seems the source of the problem. Renato first attempts indirection: apparently women are too fragile to handle the truth. When this tactic fails, Renato appeals to Albin through a traditionally female code of behavior: self-sacrificial altruism. If Albin really wants Laurent's happiness, he will leave of his own accord. In the execution of his scene of departure, Albin continues to illustrate negative female characteristics. His behavior always contains a note of emotional blackmail, of female manipulation, which culminates in his threat of suicide. Albin finally uses his physical weakness successfully to force Renato to revoke his decision.

In the course of Albin's recovery and reconciliation with Renato, the famous "toast" scene takes place, consistently cited by film critics, both gay and straight, as the funniest sequence in *LA CAGE AUX FOLLES*. Like many gay critics, David Ansen of *Newsweek* (13 Aug. 1979, p. 77) interprets this episode, in which Renato attempts to teach Albin to butter toast "like a man" and to walk "like John Wayne," as a "sly comment on our unexamined assumptions about masculinity and femininity." Yet, this explicit treatment of virility, here mockingly

identified with decisive gestures, physical strength, and eventually violence, permits the typically female behavior of Albin to stand unquestioned. If he is in a position to be insulted by the men at the bar, it is because of his vain need to "freshen up a bit." His reaction when verbally assaulted is to run for a male protector whom he later "pays" with his ego-boosting admiration of Renato's bravery.

Although Albin is the primary focus of the criticism directed against women, Molinaro uses female characters and attitudes toward them for reinforcement. Renato centers his negative reaction to the news of Laurent's marriage entirely on the girl — the "salope" (slut). In theory, the scene reverses roles since the traditional matrimonial comedy would portray a father concerned about losing his "little girl" to a man who could never prove himself "good enough" for her. Feminist critics such as Molly Haskell (*From Reverence to Rape*, New York: Penguin Books, 1973) have been quick in recent years to praise any film that challenges stereotypical sex behavior on the grounds that the single most important factor in improving the image of women lies in increasing the range of possible character traits and types of behavior open to them, even when this means critical portraits. But we must not value content to the exclusion of form. In the case of *LA CAGE AUX FOLLES*, where the underlying structure of attitudes stands unchallenged, Molinaro's narrative inversion merely serves to let pass unseen an entirely traditional attack on women. He has cleverly created a situation in which men can openly call women bad names and have it accepted as comedy. Moreover, Renato's behavior serves in passing to reinforce the standard myth that homosexuals hate women.

Not surprisingly, the Charrier family also helps to further the denigration of women. We are offered two new versions of stereotypical femininity, both defined by their (lack of) sexuality: the blond virgin and "the ice-cold mother of the bride" (Brendan Gill, *The New Yorker*, 28 May, 1979, p. 122). Charrier's political career and the future of his "Union for Moral Order" have been endangered when his superior, the President Berthier, is found dead in the arms of a woman who is a prostitute, a minor, and a black. The message is clear enough: women threaten individual men and the male-established moral order of the world. But Mme. Charrier, eager in any case to arrange a proper marriage for her daughter, immediately understands that in a society in which women are virtually interchangeable, a "good" one can be substituted for a "bad." The virgin's sacrifice — a big white wedding — will erase the prostitute's (black) stain.

Aside from furnishing a new negative image of women, the characteristics of the prostitute link racism and sexism, common in Western society. Albin himself performs Marlene Dietrich in blackface in *LA CAGE AUX FOLLES II*. The other homosexual transvestite who appears with exaggerated and stereotypical female mannerisms in both films is Jacob, the black maid who, significantly, dresses "like a whore," and whose job adds the negative criterion of class to those of race and sex.

Poiret's play allows Jacob a number of lines in which he openly mocks his "masters" for their racism. In the transposition to the screen, Molinaro abandons the exorcism effected by these explicit accusations, so that the filmed stereotype functions in silence, thus reinforcing conventional attitudes. I would not for a moment claim that Molinaro's intentions are overtly racist or overtly sexist, but the change in Jacob from stage to screen may help us to grasp the hidden assumptions of the film. Molinaro's failure to avoid suspect signs of prejudice — a black servant in a white household, for example — indicates a low level of consciousness, an almost total lack of awareness of the existence of a social problem. Such blindness or blissful ignorance can explain Molinaro's using hostility to women as the very substructure of his film. This substructure is unexamined, unexplained, and still so "natural" as to be invisible, no doubt, for Molinaro himself and, unfortunately, for much of his film's audience.

The use Molinaro makes of Charrier himself, who within his own milieu plays a fool's role comparable to that of Albin, proves revealing. With their initial appearances on camera, Molinaro begins to establish the parallel: we see both Charrier and Albin sneak the chocolates they are not allowed. Already Molinaro associates Charrier with self-indulgent and weak willed women as well as with Albin. And in the film's finale, Charrier is forced to dress in drag to escape the photographers and reporters who lie in wait outside the club.

In Poiret's play, everyone, including Georges (Renato) and Laurent, puts on female clothes, but Molinaro keeps his ideological message pure: only those who are ridiculed and ridiculous are women or, one is tempted to deduce, only women are ridiculous. Thus, *LA CAGE AUX FOLLES II* contains a parallel episode. The sequel announces a potentially promising switch when the secret agents protecting Albin are forced into disguise. But although the agents dress as gays and attempt to imitate the effeminate behavior that Molinaro apparently equates with all homosexuality, they do not dress as women. Moreover, the single scene in which they attempt their masquerade — poorly — ends in a fistfight. A scene that seems about to challenge traditional assumptions once again ends in a reinforcement of convention.

In a final assault on women, *LA CAGE AUX FOLLES* attacks all three mothers. Simone represents the bad mother who willfully abandons her child at birth and admits herself that she was "never very maternal." Although in Poiret's play Laurent himself invites Simone to Saint-Tropez, in Molinaro's film version he harbors serious resentment against his mother. By extending the negative treatment of women explicitly to include Mme. Charrier, the "good" mother, the film especially reveals its determination to denigrate women. Molinaro places Mme. Charrier in a purely gratuitous situation, the only function of which can be to make her appear ridiculous: Renato leaves Mme. Charrier staggering under the cumbersome weight of a huge crucifix.

Albin, disguised as Laurent's mother, offers another illustration of the

hysterical female, newly fussy and silly. Albin is forced into this final disguise by his inability to look successfully masculine. Ansen characterizes the character's appearance in a three-piece suit as an "attempted *butch* masquerade" (my emphasis). Thus Albin's fundamental identification as female is confirmed by his failure to succeed where all women fail, in an attempt to join the masculine world.

Albin's problems in the sequel to *LA CAGE AUX FOLLES* remain specifically female, although he is now confronted with the added indignity of age and its threat to his attractiveness and ability to please. Molinaro humiliates him not only as woman but also as a woman who persists in behaving as male society has taught him when the role is no longer becoming. If plot were of any importance, *LA CAGE AUX FOLLES II* would end a good forty minutes before Molinaro abruptly introduces a lengthy Italian sequence. Richard Schickel makes the disturbing comment (*Time*, 2 March, 1981, p. 52) that only at this point does "the picture come alive." Jack Babuscio goes even further to identify this "very funny scene" as "unquestionably the best, most inspired in the film." Yet, dramatically the episode is totally gratuitous. Its only purpose and coherence are ideological.

In Italy, Albin is forced to be a woman in one of the few ways he has not yet tried — he must serve men, eat apart, work hard and constantly while men play. Renato adapts entirely too easily to his male role as lord and master. For what precisely is Albin being punished if not for being female, for imitating the character and behavior of women so effectively that he has finally earned the right to the female condition? Ironically, this may be the only moment in either film when the possibility of comedy depends on the truth of Albin's maleness and consequently on his ability to escape at any moment a degrading, humiliating situation whose inevitability for the women born into it can only be seen as tragic. Such an unspoken acknowledgement of essential male privilege may well explain why this episode alone seems consistently to arouse the same puzzling approval in gay men that it does in straight.

Such remarks as I make here normally call forth the protestation that the critic is "missing the point," focusing on clearly secondary aspects of the film, or not dealing with the film as a whole on the terms that it sets out for itself as an artistic work. Moreover, some readers will surely suspect that I lack a sense of humor. But, of course, precisely those elements of *LA CAGE AUX FOLLES* that are "beside the point," "secondary" — and therefore never confronted openly — constitute its ideology and so permit the constant reinforcement of attitudes unacceptable if voiced aloud. We can laugh at *LA CAGE AUX FOLLES* and even at its sequel. Indeed, it is hard not to. But laughter need never blind us to the discrete social and political messages contained in the most entertaining of films, for these messages function best when we show our willingness to ignore them.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Blow Out Fake humanism

by Beth Horning

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In Brian DePalma's BLOW OUT, a movie soundman accidentally records the "accidental death" of a presidential hopeful. Jack (John Travolta) is out taping the night wind when he hears a gunshot, then a blow out, and sees a car crash through a bridge railing and into the water. He manages to rescue the candidate's companion Sally (Nancy Allen), and together they figure out that the death wasn't accidental at all. Instead, a goon, a self-appointed employee of a rival political party, had purposefully shot out the tire. So throughout the rest of the film, he pursues the couple, aiming to destroy the incriminating tape and kill Sally.

We understand why he shows no interest in killing Jack only if we remember that Brian DePalma wrote and directed the film — the same Brian DePalma who wrote and directed last year's brutally misogynist DRESSED TO KILL. DePalma disdains such pedestrian attention to plot logic. It doesn't especially bother him that the character who, given the situation, would be the most endangered is in fact the least endangered. If he recognized the problem at all, he would no doubt point to the obvious derangement of the goon. How can we expect sound reasoning from anyone who can't even remember which VIP's he's supposed to eliminate for which clients? This particular character, you see, cannot be held responsible for his actions. Admittedly, such a character represents a pretty shabby device, but perhaps the end justifies the means. What's important is that the film portray, with consummate artistry, women dead, dying, or in fear for their lives. Also that it make some show of sophistication.

By his own lights, then, DePalma succeeds. Impressive cinematic techniques abound. Sometimes, for example, he establishes scenes with intriguing-but-not-gratuitous point-of-view shots. At other times, he effectively synchs up sound and image. Moreover, BLOW OUT proves itself an allusion-packed blockbuster, full of references to Watergate and Chappaquiddick, to the mystery/thriller genre in general, to BLOW-UP

in particular.

Unfortunately those references are pointless. And unfortunately the sheer cluttered volume of them diffuses our interest — as does the volume of Freudian sexual symbols. As an educated audience, already acutely sensitive to the interchangeability of penises, guns, knives, and audiovisual hardware, we sometimes feel DePalma is heavy-handed. (Two lovers take a midnight stroll. A long, ominous microphone looms in the foreground, secretly picking up their conversation. Get it?) The real trouble with BLOW OUT, however, is not so easy to expose. The real trouble has to do with how De Palma gets "beyond" his Freudianism, specifically his preoccupation with voyeurism. How he displays his recently emergent "maturity and humanism." And, more incidentally, how he *uses* artistry to obscure his less seemly designs. For BLOW OUT is a typically offensive DePalma product after all: its moral claims only make its basic immorality more devastating.

To address DePalma's alleged maturity and humanism, first: John Travolta's function as star image figures prominently here. Obviously, his persona lends a sexy, glamorous aura to the film. But just as crucially, De Palma calls upon other facets of that persona: the contours of this Travolta's new, improved "first adult role" resemble those of earlier, non-adult roles, most memorably the one from SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER. Four years ago, Travolta played a young man struggling to transcend a dead-end working class existence. Now he plays a somewhat less young man struggling to uphold unfashionable moral values in a corrupt world. The character Jack, too, seeks a kind of transcendence. Though a maker of trashy, voyeuristic, often pornographic movies, he uses the instruments of his moviemaking for worthy causes. They grant him opportunities for heroism. If he attaches microphones to his friend, he can track her down when her life is threatened. If he happens to record an assassination, he has evidence that may help him to see justice done. He's a spy, yes, but an exceptionally civic minded one. And you'll remember that the Travolta character in SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER "really cares" about "social issues" as well, relinquishing his dance trophy to a Puerto Rican couple who deserved it more.

Certainly, I don't mean to imply that the two roles are equivalent, or that Travolta has become the Pat Boone of the 80s. I'm only saying that DePalma relies heavily on his actor's ready-made image — not only for its slick erotic appeal but also for its capacity to whitewash. To put it another way, DePalma capitalizes on the contradictions inherent in that image, then covers his tracks by purporting to have broken it.

The ability to "love deeply," for instance, has ranked foremost among the wholesome attributes assigned to Travolta characters; and BLOW OUT features Jack lavishing tender affection on Sally. Given her status as a woefully underdeveloped character, his love is, needless to say, patronizing to the extreme. He is big-hearted enough to see how charming her vacant stares are, how endearing her child-like gullibility.

If she's "not just another bimbo," the difference is only that she's so much cuter than the rest.

But bothersome as this sort of nonsense is, it's not half so bothersome as what it makes possible. It's as if idealizing one woman gives license to DePalma's hatred of women as a whole: when the goon who's after Sally kills two other women as part of his plan, we're expected to be relieved. Since the heroine herself survives, their violent, degrading deaths don't matter. He stabs a receptionist in a ditch; he strangles a prostitute in a restroom stall. He hacks the shape of the liberty bell into the stomachs of both. We're supposed to accept this as part of the series of false alarms that customarily build up suspense in a scary movie.

DePalma's way of presenting all this further reveals his woman-hatred and the unredeemed voyeurism bound up in it. We take on the point of view of the murderer, following the unsuspecting victims as they complete their day-to-day tasks. There's something "titillating" about this in itself. We're Peeping Toms, and Peeping Toms who know what kind of extravagant violation awaits our subjects. As if that weren't enough, DePalma lets us watch the second victim, a prostitute, pick up a trick, administer a blowjob in a phone booth, and proceed to the toilet to "freshen up." Predictably, her end is every bit as arty as it is demeaning, with the sequence's skillful editing and gorgeous photography (rich dark tones, bright red accents): the cinematic technique distracts us from the content's true horror.

Finally, though Sally's own demise does matter tremendously — and though its portrayal is not voyeuristic — I nevertheless believe I must note it here: the most romantic scene in the entire show is played with her corpse. Jack holds it tenderly, despairingly while garish fireworks light up its face (more brilliant cinematography: we have to *remind* ourselves what's going on). He has rigged her with his best bugging devices, he has traced her cries, but he has arrived moments too late (still more brilliant cinematography: slow motion shots of fast action — à la Peckinpah). Months later, Jack is still under the weather, desultory, fitfully watching the news and replaying the tape of Sally's death-struggles — which, full of heavy breathing and so forth, seems disturbingly sexual. He has dubbed one of her screams into a soundtrack, and he's appropriately bitter when his boss congratulates him on its effectiveness: that "humanity" again.

That scream, as a matter of fact, marks the conclusion of the film's "comic relief" subplot. BLOW OUT's opening sequence is explicit, standard fare pornography, shamelessly tasteless. We look in on several sexually active college women through the eyes of a "pervert" who hangs around a dorm, heart pounding with lust. When at last he confronts one in the shower, we hear a "humorously" un-blood-curdling wail. Cut to the screening room, where an exasperated Jack and his boss berate the mini-talented starlet. This is the starlet whose scream Sally's will replace, as you may have guessed. To return to the opening sequence, I find it paradigmatic of DePalma's rather insidious strategies: he releases

a fair amount of pornographic footage, then "takes it back." It was "only a joke." Similarly, he has a goon-run-amok murder women (it "doesn't count," since the character is "crazy"), and he makes the murders "visually exciting" (we can't see the animosity for the art). Then he tries to pass it all off as "romantic" and "human." I'll give him credit for one thing: he does know how to frighten an audience. But what's really frightening about BLOW OUT is the mentality behind it.

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Man of Marble. Man of Iron Polish film and politics

by Lisa DiCaprio

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A new joke currently circulates in Warsaw, one of a number of what have become almost a new genre under the conditions of martial law:

"What is it when 10 people get together? A party rally. What is it when 10 million get together? A small group of extremists."

Just as Reagan has denounced the revolution in El Salvador as a Soviet plot, the Soviet Union and the Polish government have characterized Solidarity as a CIA conspiracy.

Andrzej Wajda's two recently acclaimed films, *MAN OF MARBLE* and *MAN OF IRON*, show how Solidarity, a movement encompassing almost a third of the Polish population, was neither a CIA plot, nor a "small group of extremists," but the logical consequence of the major working class revolts in post-WW2 Polish history.

Today, the Polish government's propaganda has reached such an absurd height that reference has been made to Solidarity as a "myth." In the face of such official obfuscation, Wajda's films will remain as a lasting chronicle of a movement which today has been forced underground but remains very much alive.

The Polish government understands well the "subversive" nature of *MAN OF IRON* and *MAN OF MARBLE*. During the Solidarity Congress in Gdansk, walls were plastered announcing the release of *MAN OF IRON*. Today, both films are banned. The Polish government unsuccessfully attempted to withdraw *MAN OF IRON* as Poland's entry in the Academy Awards. Wajda himself was originally placed in a concentration camp, then under house arrest, and is now in Paris directing a film about Danton. Krystyna Janda, who plays the principal character in *MAN OF MARBLE*, also lives in Paris, which has rapidly become the international center for Polish exile activity.

The truth, as Marx wrote, is revolutionary. The search for the truth, its dissemination among the Polish people, and its preservation in the face of official state repression, constitute the main themes of MAN OF MARBLE and MAN OF IRON. The truth that Wajda seeks to uncover is how a situation could arise in which the supposed "party of the working class" and the state apparatus become employed against the interests of the working class. Wajda confronts us with the reality of a "workers' state" in which workers who protest their conditions are denounced as "hooligans" and "anti-socialist" elements and shot and killed by the Polish police.

Many on the left today do not know clearly how to view Solidarity. This movement poses many questions in a sharp way: the role of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe following WW2, the nature of the Soviet model of heavy industrialization, the role of the Communist Party in socialist society, the class character of the Soviet Union and Poland today.

For years, the left has raised these questions in a peripheral fashion: the declaration of martial law in Poland means that they can no longer be avoided. In Poland, we have seen the rise of the most significant workers' movement in Europe since WW2. Should we condemn this movement as counter-revolutionary, support it uncritically, or support it with critical reservations? MAN OF MARBLE and MAN OF IRON answer some, but not all, of these questions.

These are, above all, inspiring films which draw us into a historical process whose full ramifications are yet to be realized despite severe repression. The Polish workers have risen out of defeat before: they will rise again.

As spectators, we increasingly begin to feel participants in this drama which unfolds in MAN OF MARBLE with a young woman film student's search for Birkut, a once exemplary bricklayer later condemned to ignominy. Through the life of Birkut and later his son, Maciek, the focus of MAN OF IRON, Wajda surveys the principal revolts in postwar Polish history. The films make reference to these events: 1956 in Poznan, the student revolt of 1968, the 1970 strikes in Gdansk which left many workers of the Lenin shipyards dead, the 1976 strikes at Ursus and Radom and, finally, the establishment of Solidarity during the shipyard strikes on the Baltic Coast in 1980, and the historic Gdansk agreements which have now been reduced to mere scraps of paper.

Many have noted that Wajda's focus in MAN OF MARBLE is much sharper than in MAN OF IRON. This is due, in large part, to Solidarity's own limitations. While the Polish workers were very clear on what they did not want, they were less sure of how to construct a new future. Solidarity was a great social movement, encompassing millions with varying political views. The movement did not resolve many concrete questions, such as how to restructure the economy. However, despite distortions by the capitalist media, Solidarity did not aim to restore private ownership of property. It sought genuine social control of production by the working class. How to ensure such control could not

be worked out entirely in the abstract, but only in the process of political activity. Jaruzelski's tanks terminated this process on December 12.

MAN OF MARBLE

In *MAN OF MARBLE*, Wajda provides us with a view of Poland in which an impressive industrial infrastructure has been constructed, illiterate peasants have learned how to read, workers have been given new skills, and workers' housing has been built. Following WW2, the vast majority of Poland's industry and housing lay in ruins.⁽¹⁾ Heavy industrialization, however, has been financed at the cost of sacrificing basic consumer goods, an endemic problem in the Polish economy which has led to numerous food riots. While the nationalized economy remains in the hands of the state, the Polish workers, in whose name the state begins massive projects and makes political decisions, are not the masters of their society.

Wajda has chosen the ultra-modern steel complex of Mowa Huta to illustrate this point. As we will learn, it is here that a Polish film director first discovered Birkut. Birkut symbolizes the idealistic Polish worker who believes in and wants to work for the common good. However, the Polish internal security police blows what could have been a relatively minor incident — an accident during a bricklaying demonstration — out of proportion. Birkut's downfall from official favor has begun. His futile fight represents what is honest and forthright about the Polish working class. It will be carried out, in collective form, by the next generation which will win temporary victory by forming Solidarity.

Wajda constantly dwells on the theme of honesty, as he depicts a society in which the government, by various means, seeks to maintain the fiction of a socialist society. In a recent *Monthly Review* article, a Polish writer now living in Paris describes how official government propaganda serves as a form of "conceptual embezzlement."

“Not only are truncated versions of once powerful revolutionary slogans arranged in a shameless pastiche alongside chauvinist sentiments and medieval superstitions, but also the very meaning of the fundamental terms has been transformed beyond recognition. Thus for example the Polish word for ‘socialism,’ ‘socialization,’ and ‘internationalism’ today designate respectively the existing social order, state ownership and subordination to the interests of the Soviet Union. These examples form part of a general phenomenon of conceptual embezzlement which reaches deep into the vernacular.”⁽²⁾

Birkut's honesty finds its match in that of Agnieszka, played by Krystyna Janda. Agnieszka, a young film student, has chosen the Stakhanovite Birkut as the subject for her thesis film. She aims to unmask the official history of Birkut and, in the process, meets resistance from every quarter of officialdom.

Wajda's inspiration for the character of Agnieszka is the courageous contemporary Polish woman director, Agnieszka Holland. Her film, *GORACZKA (FEVER)*, was the Grand Prize winner of the 1981 Gdansk Film Festival. In *GORACZKA*, Holland portrays the fate of a group of Polish-nationalist terrorists during the 1905 rebellion against the Russian occupying authorities. Although set in a historical context, the film conveys an indirect but very clear message concerning Poland's current subordinate position to the Soviet Union.⁽³⁾

MAN OF MARBLE has many of the characteristics of a political thriller as we follow the fictional Agnieszka in her search for why Birkut "disappeared." She begins by screening old newsreels, many of which have never been released to the public for "technical" reasons. In 1980, a special showing of such films, publicized as *FROM THE SHELVES*, was held in Warsaw.⁽⁴⁾ The first film Agnieszka screens which never made its way out of the editing room is *BIRTH OF A CITY*.

In *BIRTH OF A CITY*, we see the construction of Nowa Huta in the 1950s. Dozens of men are lined up in the mud in a food line. There are no women to be seen. The men are housed in barracks. When presented with a single fish on a plate for lunch, they begin spontaneously to pelt the party official with the fish and succeed in driving him out. Birkut is one of these workers.

As Agnieszka's studio director becomes aware of the direction of her research, he attempts to dissuade her of the film project. He argues,

"No one has yet touched on the 50s. Why don't you deal with a subject that has no risk of ambiguity. A better project would be facts — facts are steelworks and their output."

Agnieszka and the film director are both in their thirties and represent the generation which has grown up in postwar Poland, 50% of Poland's current population. While Agnieszka symbolizes the idealist intellectual who is not satisfied with official answers, her director has sold himself to the existing order.

Undaunted, Agnieszka pursues her search for Birkut. In another film clip, she views huge posters of Birkut pulled down, dragged through the street and unceremoniously thrown away to be replaced by another figure. Intrigued, she searches for his statue and films it herself secretly in a museum warehouse. As she is leaving, the curator is puzzled but does not know what Agnieszka has done. The curator says,

"Those statues have not been exhibited for 20 years — we have much better ones on display now. We've got better sculptors here now. He had toppled over."

ARCHITECTS OF OUR HAPPINESS provides Agnieszka with even more clues. We see Birkut at a 1950 New Year celebration at the Warsaw Polytechnic, where he and other heroes of labor are congratulated and honored. Birkut's life, states the film's narrator, "is a march from one

triumph to another. He is a delegate to the Polish congress and an inspiration to our artists." We see Birkut in a museum admiring the new works of "socialist realism" and posing for a sculptor. The film voice states, "The Polish masses: a fitting theme for artists. The noble figure of man is debased and distorted in modern art." Next, Birkut is shown working out mathematical problems at night after work: "Only in Peoples Poland have these hands been provided with books and newspapers." The film also shows Birkut's marriage to Hanka Tomczyk, a gymnast, played by Krystyna Zachwatowicz, and their entry into their new apartment in Nowa Huta, built by Birkut and his comrades. This must seem ironic to Poles today, given the present housing shortage.

Agnieszka resolves to find the original director of this film, Burski, and she meets this internationally acclaimed cineaste in his luxurious home. People rumor that Burski used Birkut as the springboard for his career. Burski tells her how he organized a spectacle to film at Nowa Huta — to show a crew laying 30,000 bricks in a single shift — so as to make a newsreel to promote the Stakhanovite campaign. Birkut creates a new bricklaying method by which he assumes responsibility for only the outer layer of bricks while his assistants fill in the rest. Birkut is sincerely committed to the construction of workers housing. However, as the project begins to assume a somewhat sensational quality, he begins to become resentful and rejects the additional food he is given, saying, "I'm not a prize goose to be fattened up."

As the day approaches, more preparations are made. A band is commissioned to play for the entire shift. Polish radio is on hand. As Birkut, his partner Witek, and helpers walk towards the site, Burski begins to criticize how they walk and makes them rehearse. He shouts, "Don't shuffle, stride, loose limbed — like real workers!" Birkut accomplishes the feat, and all but collapses before Burski can film him accepting a rose — small compensation.

Given his popularity at this point, how is it the Party later condemned Birkut to ignominy? In a flashback, we see that Birkut and Witek have been sent by Party officials throughout Poland to demonstrate the efficacy of their bricklaying method. This was part of the Stakhanovite movement, in which "shock workers" were employed to raise production. The movement originated in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, then was applied by the postwar Polish government. Piecework and rates were used as an incentive to increase production. Essentially a form of speed-up, this campaign elicited hostility and resentment from certain sectors of the working class. In the film, Birkut receives a hot brick passed to him by another worker. First it passes through the hands of Witek, but as Witek is wearing gloves he does not feel the heat. Birkut's hands are seared. Screaming, he is carried off to a hospital.

Rather than acknowledge internal opposition to Stakhanovism as exemplified in this incident, the Polish Party officials choose to characterize it as external sabotage, a convenient method of dismissing workers' discontent. In 1956, for example, workers on strike from the

ZISPO engineering plant in Poznan demonstrated in the streets demanding bread. They shouted, "Enough! We cannot go on like this! Turn aside from the false road!" Workers were shot down, denounced by the government initially as imperialist agents and "provocateurs." Later the government was forced to concede that legitimate discontent spurred the Poznan riots. In MAN OF MARBLE, Witek and Birkut are tried and convicted as spies.

Burski suggests that Agnieszka find Witek. "He has been rehabilitated and is now high up at Katowice." As preparation for meeting with Witek, Agnieszka convinces the reluctant head of the film school to let her view a 1952 classified Polish Film News production, TRAITORS OF THE DOCK, where the film narrator states that Birkut and Witek were part of a "sabotage ring bent on falsifying plans and striking at champion workers." This "ring" is said to have had connections with foreign intelligence.

Agnieszka succeeds in locating Witek at Katowice, the huge steel mill which produces 50% of all Polish steel, one of the principal sites of resistance following the declaration of martial law. Located near the city of Krakow, Katowice was specifically built by the postwar Polish government to counter what it viewed as petit bourgeois strongholds. Today pollution from the great steel works threatens many of Krakow's irreplaceable medieval architectural structures.

It is not a coincidence that Wajda chose to place Witek in Katowice. Unlike Birkut, Witek succeeded in ingratiating himself with the official bureaucracy, a symbol of the working class opportunist. By compromising and forsaking his principles, he has been rewarded with a managerial position in which he no longer has to perform manual labor. This is underscored by Wajda placing the discussion between Agnieszka and Witek in a helicopter, which offers an impressive aerial view of the steelworks. Wajda thus emphasizes the connection between the emphasis on heavy industrialization, the hallmark of the Polish government's claim to socialist construction, and political opportunism. A rail line connects Katowice directly to the Soviet Union and is used for transporting steel out of Poland, symbol of the subordination of the Polish economy to the Soviet Union. The coal-mining region of Katowice served as the political base of Edward Gierek, who succeeded Gomulka following the strikes of 1970. Production at Katowice is organized to serve the two masters of the Polish working class: the Soviet Union and Polish bureaucracy.

Witek asks Agnieszka, "What makes you interested in the 1950s?" Agnieszka commands, "Begin with Birkut. You all owe him something." Through a series of flashbacks, Witek fills in the details of Birkut's unsuccessful attempt to bring his case to justice. We see Birkut accompanying Witek to the office of the Internal Security, where Witek disappears. The interrogator then maintains that he never saw Witek. The film depicts the alienation of the working class, as represented by Birkut, from the internal police whose presumed function is to

"safeguard socialism." Today, the budget for security is three times more than that allotted for Poland's entire steel and machine industry.

Birkut even goes to Warsaw to argue for Witek. There he confronts a cold, impersonal figure who is a high official in the public security. The bureaucrat informs Birkut,

"We are in the middle of an ideological struggle. We know of the case and will inquire of it. Think of it as a political struggle. Mistakes happen and if this is a mistake, we will set it right. Don't take things into your own hands. Leave it to us. Trust the People's Justice."

Birkut returns to Gdansk and attempts to raise the question of Witek at a union meeting. He genuinely views himself as an active participant in society, not a passive observer. Birkut assumes that in a "workers' state," the grievances of the working class deserve serious attention. At the meeting, Birkut shouts, "A dreadful injustice has been committed." Trade union officials cut off his microphone. A chorus begins: "Socialism will prevail by force of example, onward stout workers."

Cut off from his work and comrades, Birkut becomes demoralized and turns to drinking. Alcohol is a serious problem among the Polish working class. Its consumption is, in a sense, actively encouraged by the government to provide a diversion from existing social reality. Birkut temporarily joins a gypsy band. During one drunken episode, Birkut expresses his anger by throwing a brick at the office of Public Safety. He is eventually brought to trial with Witek, found guilty, and imprisoned.

Although not stated specifically, it is implied that Birkut was released in October of 1956 as part of Gomulka's so-called "liberalization." His arrest and prison term are attributed to "errors and distortions." (I have been told that the main cemetery in Warsaw is filled with gravestones on which it is stated that a worker or party official was shot and then "rehabilitated" in the 1950s. The cemetery provides a survey of the various turns in official party policy.)[\(5\)](#)

While Witek accepted his unfortunate fate and proceeded to live his life without reference to the past, Birkut was unable to find his way in the "new Poland" of Gomulka. At the same union hall where he was once forced off the platform for insisting on a full discussion of Witek's case, Birkut is now applauded. Confused by the new turn of events, Birkut wanders through the streets of Nowa Huta. Birkut, one of the original builders of the city, is now an outsider. Here, Wajda is representing the disillusionment of the idealistic non-party worker. He implies that the "locals" are those who succeed in reconciling themselves to a position of political powerlessness. They have no vision of a better society and live only for each day.

Agnieszka's final interview takes place with Birkut's wife, Hanka, who now lives in a luxury apartment. Like Witek, she has chosen the path of opportunism which, as in the West, brings its material rewards. While Birkut was in prison, Hanka denounced him as an imperialist agent. She

prostituted herself to a bar owner in Zacobane and became an alcoholic. At one point, Hanka's husband offered Birkut a "position." He was to be responsible for bribing various officials. This is a reference to the "arrangements" Poles must make in order to survive, given the level of their salaries. Corruption permeates every facet of Polish society. Birkut, of course, refused the offer. Hanka does not know what has become of him. She does know that he worked at one point at the shipyard at Gdansk where Birkut and Hanka's son, Maciek, also did, but under Hanka's name — Tomczyk.

As Agnieszka is preparing to leave, Hanka's husband comes in, curses her for drinking again, and begins to beat her. Hanka thus provides a contrast to Witek. Her guilt for denouncing Birkut has transformed her into a pathetic woman, deprived of any positive sense of identity. She is, fundamentally, unable to reconcile herself to the corruption by which her husband provides her with material luxury. Hanka's deterioration also underscores the oppressed position of women in Poland, who, as in the United States, are confined to the lowest paid, most menial types of work.⁽⁶⁾ To live well, Hanka must attach herself to a man with "connections."

Again exhibiting her undaunted determination, Agnieszka goes to Gdansk to find Birkut's son. She arrives as the shift is changing. Thousands of workers are pouring out of the shipyard, which employs a total of 16,000. In a somewhat implausible scene, Agnieszka recognizes a young worker who resembles Birkut. An aerial view of the imposing Gdansk shipyard provides a prophetic image of events to come, unknown to Wajda at the time *MAN OF MARBLE* was produced.

Birkut's son, Maciek, is at first reluctant to discuss his father, but Agnieszka succeeds in winning his confidence. Maciek reveals that his father is dead. How he died is unknown.

The final scene of *MAN OF MARBLE* shows Agnieszka and Maciek marching down the corridor of her film school. Since she has succeeded in "producing" Birkut's son, if not Birkut himself, the film director should allow her to proceed with the film on Birkut.

Originally, Wajda conceived of an ending to *MAN OF MARBLE* in which Agnieszka finds the unmarked grave of Birkut, a victim of the police shootings of striking workers at the Gdansk shipyard in 1970. This, however, was seen as too provocative. Before the emergence of Solidarity a decade later, official Polish history eliminated any reference to the 1970 strikes. Its memory was kept alive, unofficially, through the workers themselves.

[\(MAN OF IRON, continued on page 2\)](#)

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Man of Marble. Man of Iron. p.2

by Lisa DiCaprio

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MAN OF IRON

MAN OF MARBLE premiered in Warsaw on February 1, 1977. In 1980, during the strikes in Gdansk, Wajda visited the shipyard. A worker shouted to him, "Now you must make a film about our story — MAN OF IRON." The workers thus directly commissioned Wajda's second film. Its production, from beginning to end, was completed in nine months. This resulted in a certain sacrifice in cinematic quality, as compared to MAN OF MARBLE.

MAN OF IRON no longer emphasizes Agnieszka in her search for the truth. In many ways, MAN OF MARBLE's success depended on her role. In earlier films, such as HUNTING FLIES, Wajda depicted women in an extremely derogatory manner. In MAN OF MARBLE, Krystyna Janda's extraordinary dynamism animates an otherwise long film. The alterations of role in MAN OF IRON disappoint not only feminists, but also those who appreciated the determination she brought to bear in the earlier film. In MAN OF IRON, Agnieszka does not appear until almost a third of the way through the film and then her role is to relate, through a series of flashbacks, her marriage to Maciek, their somewhat limited joint political activity, and Maciek's organizing at the shipyard which culminates in the formation of Solidarity.

The main character in MAN OF IRON is Winkiel, a spineless radio reporter once fired for assuming an inappropriate view of the 1970 strikes and later reinstated as a result of a friend's intervention. Now this friend, an official with the internal security police, strongly suggests that as repayment Winkiel accept a special assignment. The police will send Winkiel to Gdansk in order to prove that the CIA created Solidarity.

In an interview in *Cineaste*, Wajda discusses this issue of self-censorship:

"MAN OF IRON opens with a scene in the state radio station during the strikes in Gdansk. A woman is reading a script, '...but there are the ones who do not hope, who believe that

everything is an illusion...' A reporter comments, 'the censor won't like this.' He moves on to rehearsing a group of women who are to appeal as wives and mothers for the strikers to return to work. Precisely this tactic was used by the Polish government, following the declaration of martial law. It was employed especially to undermine the Piosn strike where thousands of workers occupied the mine for two weeks. Access to the media was a crucial demand of Solidarity. Walls in Warsaw were often seen with the slogan, 'DON'T BELIEVE WHAT THEY SAY ON TELEVISION — TV IS LYING.'"(7)

On reaching Gdansk, Winkiel's main concern is that Solidarity has banned the sale of vodka. He is not ideologically committed to his assignment, but refusal to comply would cost him his job as a reporter. The police specifically want compromising material on Maciek, implying that perhaps Maciek will be "removed." If Solidarity members attempt to create a martyr of Maciek, this material can be released in a social television program. The representative of the internal security police explains, "His father was involved in 1970. So counter-revolution runs in the blood."

As Winkiel is sent on his mission, he is warned,

"Warsaw does not realize how dangerous things are. They have forgotten one basic rule: we're not here to share power. Can you see this? Or, have you got it in for the workers?"

His superior concludes, "No one will own up to you. Avoid the shipyard — there you are beyond our protection."

Previous to the declaration of martial law, it was often said that two Polands existed: the old Poland typified by the rule of the Party in Warsaw, and the new Poland of Solidarity in the shipyard of Gdansk. Despite the warnings, Winkiel is irresistibly drawn to the "new Poland." Rather than create misinformation, Winkiel slowly becomes convinced of Solidarity's legitimacy. This, then, is MAN OF IRON's basic plot. Through a series of interviews and flashbacks, we follow Maciek's growth from a participant in the student movement of 1968, his decision to leave the polytechnic University and become a worker at the Gdansk shipyard, his attempts to convince the Gdansk workers to support the strikers at Ursus and Radom in 1976, and finally his role in creating Solidarity.

Maciek's political radicalization begins with the student movement of 1968. Mass student protest was sparked when the Minister of the Interior banned the production of a classic Polish play with anti-Russian overtones. In the protests that followed, hundreds of students were expelled from the universities, many lecturers lost their positions, and whole university departments were eliminated by the government. The students succeeded in shutting down all Polish universities. They appealed to the workers at the Gdansk shipyard for support, but in vain.

Maciek is unable to convince his father of the legitimacy of the students' demands. Birkut represents the suspicious worker who saw the student movement as a "palace revolt — a provocation." His hostile response reflects the very real position adopted by many workers at the time. These workers thought that the students were being used to further certain elements in the Party who were to the right of Gomulka and who wanted to use the disorder as justification for further repression. In retrospect, there seems to have been an element of truth in this suspicion, but it would be erroneous to characterize the entire movement in these terms. The hostility of the workers was also not entirely spontaneous, but in part orchestrated by the party itself. "Angry workers" were brought in from the surrounding areas of various cities, especially Warsaw, to beat up demonstrating students.⁽⁸⁾ Birkut remains unconvinced by Maciek's arguments and concludes, "When the time comes, the students and workers will march together."

This unity, however, was not destined to be achieved for another eight years. The 1968 situation of workers' failing to support students was completely reversed two years later, in 1970, when the shipyard workers of the three Baltic cities of Gdynia, Gdansk, and Szczecin went on strike. Their appeal to the students solicited only silence. While the workers marched past their dormitories, the embittered students refused to act.

We are informed that Maciek suffered deeply during this period. He is torn between his understanding on an intellectual level that the workers should be supported and his anger that they refused to aid students in 1968. A bloodied woman student awakens him at night to inform him that Birkut is dead and his body cannot be collected. It is blocked by tanks. We see a procession headed by a bloodstained flag where marchers carry the corpse of a murdered worker on a torn-off door to the city hall. This scene offers the most vivid symbol of 1970.

In a flashback later on, we see that as he was crossing a bridge, Birkut was hit by bullets whose origin was a mystery. In real life, workers were gunned down by fire from helicopters. In this flashback, Wajda also shows us how the dead workers were lined up in beds, covered with sheets, with only their bare feet exposed, to which an identification tag is fastened. A friend remarks,

"They buried Birkut like a dog. Later, they removed the marker on his grave. Maciek said that this was to obliterate all traces of the dead, so the people will forget."

Of this period, Edmond Baluka, a leader at the Szczecin shipyard later forced into exile in London, commented, "We now know how to go on strike. We don't know how to win a strike." The most visible political change caused by the strikes was the replacement of Gomulka by Edward Gierek. Later, a joke would emerge, "What is the difference between Edward Gierek and Wladyslaw Gomulka? No difference, only Gierek has not realized it."

Maciek anticipates that there will be no difference between Gierek and Gomulka. During a television speech given by Gierek on assuming office, Maciek becomes uncontrollably violent, and he throws a chair at the television. Concerned that he will be arrested, Maciek's friends attempt to restrain him and place him under care at a psychiatric hospital. The police arrive soon after Maciek is led away in an ambulance.

On the day of his release from the hospital, Maciek's friend asks a psychiatric worker, "Is he really crazy?" She answers, "No more crazy than our 30 million compatriots." In his ward Maciek informs his friend of his decision to leave the polytechnic university and work in the shipyard. He is determined that the truth will not be buried with the workers. Maciek is infused with the desire to avenge Birkut's death. When his friend responds, "You want to suffer," Maciek answers,

"No, I want to be free. I want to understand what my father told me and what he did."

It was, in fact, only in 1976, with the formation of KOR (Committee for the Defense of the Workers), that any real organizational unity was expressed between sympathetic intellectuals and the workers. This was, in large part, due to the closeness of the Ursus tractor works to Warsaw, which facilitated the intellectuals' support work. Gdansk workers, however, were originally reluctant to support the 1976 strikes at Ursus and Radom.⁽⁹⁾ In a scene which brings to mind radicals arguing with American workers, Maciek attempts to convince the workers that common cause must be made. On break, the shipyard workers of Gdansk seem cynical, lethargic, and unresponsive. "Since 1970," pleads Maciek, "all of Poland has been watching us." A worker responds, "Nothing can change. We want to live normally and work in peace. I don't want to leave any orphans." Maciek answers angrily, "You mean you want to live as a slave."

Maciek also argues with his union representative to take up the defense of the Ursus and Radom workers. He is warned, "We won't support you the next time." To Maciek's protestations that he is a good worker, the official responds,

"Being a good or bad worker has nothing to do with it. Don't rock the boat. We'll probably denounce you if you go on."

In the old, official unions, Party appointees filled the most important positions as part of the system of Nomenklatura. These officials refused to raise economic and political demands. In all, over 300,000 posts of the Polish government — including positions in the media, universities, factories, etc. — became filled in this manner. This middle bureaucracy, which affects every facet of Polish social, economic, and political life, forms the foundation of Party rule in Poland. Solidarity thus raised objections to the system of Nomenklatura, particularly as it related to the appointment of plant managers.

Wajda's exposure of the official Polish unions' nature should remind us

of our own unions' character. The AFL-CIO, which proclaims its "support" for Solidarity, operates similarly to these old unions. However, while the AFL-CIO objectively represents the interests of the capitalist state by maintaining U.S. workers' struggle within capitalism's framework, the official Polish unions functioned as the State's *direct* instrument. It is in this context that Polish workers raised the crucial demand for the recognition of *independent* trade unions.

Although faced with both the Gdansk workers' relative passivity and the union's hostility, Maciek, like Agnieszka, remains undaunted. He represents the many courageous individuals who took great risks and suffered privation before Solidarity's formation. Only four years later, widespread cynicism would be replaced by optimism and an organization embracing fully one-third of the Polish population.

For his organizing activities at the Gdansk shipyard, Maciek is dismissed. Plastering up 100 posters on walls protesting the beatings at Ursus and Radom brings him a jail sentence of three months. To Winkiel, Agnieszka explains Maciek's vindication by the shipyard strikes of 1980. She asks,

"Do you know what it is like to work in a hull? If you don't know this, you don't know anything."

To reporters who question the workers' actions, Agnieszka responds,

"You are not afraid of jail if you are already there."

She concludes her discussion with Winkiel,

"What Birkut said long ago was right. 'No lie can live for long.' I hope that you can find your way in the new Poland."

Winkiel's discussion with Agnieszka, set during the period of the Gdansk negotiations, makes him finally decide to renounce his role. However, Winkiel is not to be accepted in the new Poland. As he is leaving the hall where the Gdansk agreements were signed, Maciek's old roommate pulls out the hidden microphone from his coat. Now it is Winkiel who is "lost." He has burned all his connections with Warsaw's "old Poland" but failed to earn the trust of Gdansk's "new Poland." The film rewards the proponents of the truth.

Wajda thus communicates a false sense of Solidarity's permanency. For example, Agnieszka assures Winkiel, "We cannot lose. They must come to an agreement with us." The scene of the historic signing of the Gdansk agreement includes the words spoken over the loudspeaker by Deputy Prime Minister Mieczyslaw Jagielski, "There are no victors and there are no losers." Only months later, at the July congress of the Party, Jagielski himself would be a "loser." He was forced to resign from his position, presumably because of his conciliatory position towards Solidarity.

Wajda also portrays Solidarity in a somewhat misleading manner as an essentially homogeneous movement in which divisions over tactics, which did exist, are not portrayed, even in an indirect manner. From MAN OF IRON, the viewer receives the impression that a peaceful, accommodationist, evolutionary solution could have been worked out between Solidarity and the Party's moderate elements. For example, the film shows the actual appearance of the Gdansk Party Secretary, Tadeusz Fiszbach, who is shown reading a television speech and emphasizing, "We do not want another 1970." The Polish workers once said of Fiszbach, "He was the only bastard who can sleep peacefully at night." Fiszbach, widely regarded as the most important of the "moderates" who sought genuine compromise with Solidarity, has since resigned his position.

Workers recognized the inherent problem in relying on party leaders such as Fiszbach. This was demonstrated during the unprecedented meeting in 1970 between the new First Secretary of the Central Committee, Edward Gierek, and the shipyard workers of Szczecin. During this meeting, a worker stated,

"Now the moderates who want to negotiate have the power, but the struggle goes on always, and if they lose, we are lost."

The "moderates" within the Polish United Workers Party did "lose." But the greatest loss was to the membership of Solidarity itself. For 16 months the very existence of Solidarity hung on a thread, ready to be snapped at any moment by the Polish government or Soviet tanks. The answer came on December 12. To view MAN OF IRON, however, one would not have any sense of the real fragility of Solidarity's position in relation to the Polish government. There is only one minor illusion to possible repression. As Winkiel is leaving the site of the signing, he is called over by a man in a car whom we may presume to be a member of the internal security police. With confidence, he says to Winkiel that the agreement is only "a scrap of paper."

Only months after the release of MAN OF IRON in the United States, Solidarity's agreements with the government were reduced precisely to "scraps of paper." How could this have happened so quickly and effectively? In Wajda's vision — and it was a vision shared by certain leaders of Solidarity — only the internal security police offered an organized opposition to Solidarity. Wajda shows this at the very beginning when the police tell Winkiel he must uncover links between the CIA and Solidarity because

"Warsaw does not realize how dangerous things are. They have forgotten one basic rule: we're not here to share power."

It is now clear that "Warsaw," which stands for the government, did not forget this "basic rule." The relation between the Polish working class and the government stands as one of class antagonism which, ultimately, could only be resolved by one side or the other's winning.[\(10\)](#) This antagonism has been revealed in the five revolts of the Polish

working class since WW2. After each revolt, the Polish government first denounced the workers as "hooligans, criminal elements, imperialist agents and provocateurs." Soon afterwards, however, it was forced to admit the existence of very real, even fundamental problems. Most revealing was Edward Gierek's December 20th televised speech given when he assumed the position of First Secretary of the Party. Gierek admitted:

1. that in formulating its policies the government had not been in the habit of taking account of reality;
2. that it had neglected to consult the working class and the intelligentsia;
3. that it had ignored the principle of collective leadership and democracy in the life of the Party; and
4. that it had failed to maintain close links with the working class and did not speak a common language with the working people.

Solidarity itself could not have made a better case to justify its existence. By his own account, Gierek condemned the Party as an organization alien to the Polish workers. The Party, however, had not only been removed from taking account of reality; it has acted with violence to protect its political power and privileges. Wajda's selection of documentary footage in both *MAN OF MARBLE* and *MAN OF IRON* does not reveal the full extent of the Polish government's repression of the workers.

In 1970, revolts occurred in the three Baltic cities of Gdansk, Gdynia, and Szczecin. Birkut is shown murdered in Gdynia. Estimates of casualties in the three cities reached into the hundreds, as the government employed tanks to spray machine gun fire into the demonstrating workers. According to a Swedish account, reported in the *New York Times*, the Gdansk death toll alone was 300. According to *Monthly Review*:

"The trouble began with shipyard workers who held meetings in their places of work and then proceeded to Communist Party headquarters with what we may surmise were mixed motives — some to vent long pent-up anger. Being met with repression rather than attempts at explanation, they attacked and in some cases destroyed Party buildings, police stations, and other symbols of authority. Large crowds were involved — one report from Szczecin estimates 10,000 people — and the army was called in to restore order."[\(11\)](#)

In contrast, Wajda's depiction of the 1970 strikes is limited to processions of workers and scattered battles with the police. This is not to suggest that he recreate a scene of 10,000 marking on the Party headquarters in Szczecin. However, the overall effect of Wajda's selection of documentary footage is to minimize the really massive scale of the workers' revolt.

Wajda also does not mention the decisive follow-up strike by women textile workers at Lodz, which finally forced the new government of Gierek to rescind price increases. Wajda's neglect of women's role in Solidarity is also evident in his misleading depiction of Solidarity's formation. In *MAN OF IRON*, Maciek describes the first hours of the Gdansk strike to a reporter: At 6:00 a.m. on August 14, workers from departments K1 and K3 of the Gdansk Lenin shipyard put down their tools. They had two demands: the reinstatement of long-time activist, Anna Walentynowicz, and a wage increase of 1,000 zloyts.⁽¹²⁾ A crane operator, Walentynowicz had been fired for her underground activities in the Baltic Free Trade Union, an organization formed by a Gdansk group in April 1978. The official explanation for Walentynowicz' firing was that she had "deserted her work post." Maciek relates how Walesa secretly scaled the shipyard gate to address the workers. "And then," says Maciek, "we knew that everything would be all right."

In fact, had all decisions been left to Walesa, Solidarity would have never come into existence. In *Solidarity: Poland in the Season of its Passion*, Lawrence Weschler analyzes the first crucial moments of Solidarity:

"August 15: Communications blackout: all phone lines to Gdansk are cut. In the town, transport is suspended. Over 50,000 workers are on strike."

"August 16: False reports of the strike's resolution almost sabotage the workers' united resolve: Walesa himself wavers, initially accepting concessions on the monument, reinstatement of fired workers, and a big pay increase. Within moments, realizing that many workers are willing to stay out for more, he changes his mind. But the strike leaders no longer have access to the loudspeakers."⁽¹³⁾

At this point, Alma Pienkowska,⁽¹⁴⁾ a nurse from the shipyard infirmary, reaches the shipyard gates and cries out to the Lenin shipyard workers that the workers in other enterprises, who had struck in sympathy, had been betrayed by the decision to end the strike. Pienkowska's impassioned speech creates a furor among the workers and, sensing their mood, Walesa annuls his decision. Two weeks later, the strike movement has spread to all of Poland. The government is forced to negotiate an agreement on the formation of independent unions with the right to strike. Solidarity is born.

Despite the weaknesses enumerated above, *MAN OF IRON* will remain an important chronicle of the principal events which led to Solidarity's formation. What Solidarity stands for has been so distorted by the Western media, that its real aims as a movement of workers for the control of production has all but been obscured. This suits the propagandistic aims of Western bourgeois governments. The Left must take a stand on Solidarity, and if Wajda's film contributes to the clarification necessary for Left support, it has served its purpose.

Since the declaration of martial law on December 12, 1981, precisely this question has been asked: Can Jaruzelski's tanks destroy all of what Solidarity accomplished and stood for? Since the first days of repression, an underground organization has functioned, supported by a wide circle of sympathizers. The Polish workers are preparing for a spring offensive under the slogan, "The Winter is Theirs. The Spring is Ours." However, the outcome of this offensive does not lie with Solidarity alone. To an important degree, it will be determined by the response of the world proletariat — including the workers in the United States.

As Daniel Singer, the author of *The Road to Gdansk* and a leading authority on Poland, said in a recent interview published in *The Guardian*:

"It is vital for the Left to take the lead in supporting Solidarity. The workers of Eastern Europe must not be led to believe that the only vision of socialism they have is the Russian tank or Jaruzelski's tank. It would be very damaging for the chance of having a socialist solution in Eastern Europe if the workers in Poland have the impression that the only people who stand by their side at this hour are the Reagans and Thatchers while we are silent." [\(15\)](#)

Notes

[1.](#) At the end of the war, Poland was left with only 38% of its industrial capacity, 35% of its agricultural resources, and 30% of its housing stock.

[2.](#) Michael Szkolny, "Revolution in Poland," *Monthly Review*, June 1981, p. 2.

[3.](#) Lawrence Weschler, *Solidarity: Poland in the Season of its Passion* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1982), p. 113.

[4.](#) Ibid., p. 49.

[5.](#) This was related to me by Richard Knauss, a member of the Solidarity Film Commission and an editor of the political journal, *Nowa*. Knauss now lives in New York.

[6.](#) Women in Poland are so burdened by the daily necessities of life that they have little time for political activity. Only 6% of the delegates to the Solidarity Congress were women. The crane operator Anna Walentynowicz has said that the main reason why she has been able to be so active politically is because she is a divorced woman without family responsibilities. The Polish government has encouraged women to remain in their traditional roles. Addressing Polish women in 1977, Edward Gierek noted in the official newspaper, *Trybuna Ludu* (August 3, 1977):

“A particularly important social function of women is motherhood, the organization of family life, and the stressing of the social value of the family ... In your hands is the happiness of Polish families, the future of our children, and the future of our nation.”

In 1980, a small group of women at Warsaw University issued a number of feminist demands. Their fate today is unknown.

[7.](#) *Cineaste*, 11:1 (Winter 1980-81).

[8.](#) Wajda omits to mention that during this period, the government employed anti-Semitism to disorient the workers. Gomulka launched an anti-Semitic campaign, which resulted in the expulsion of thousands of Jews. Today, only 6,000 Jews remain in all of Poland, yet the government again resorted to anti-Semitism during the first days following the declaration of martial law. It has been commented that this is “anti-Semitism without the Jews.” Wajda's failure to make reference to the government's use of this issue in 1968 is a serious omission, especially given the history of Poland.

[9.](#) The 1976 Ursus and Radom strikes were sparked by the government's attempt to raise food prices. In an attempt to buy the acquiescence of the Polish workers following 1970, Gierek sold the Polish economy to the Western banks. The standard of living of the working class increased rapidly between 1971 and 1975. This inflated economy crashed in 1976. Again, the workers were called on to sacrifice through increased food prices and, again, they responded with strikes.

[10.](#) Contrary to the official statements of Jaruzelski that Solidarity was planning “a counter-revolutionary coup d'etat,” the question of actual seizure of political power was never seriously posed in a consistent way by Solidarity. There were moments when the question gained more immediacy, such as in March of 1981 following the Bydgoszcz incident, in which three Solidarity members were brutally beaten by the police.

In retrospect, it seems that Solidarity almost entirely focused on the possibility of Soviet intervention and underestimated the role of the internal state apparatus. For example, real preparations were made in the event of a Soviet invasion. A scenario was conceived in which the population would immediately “disappear.” Workers would refuse to go to work, road signs would be altered to create confusion, and nameplates on apartment buildings would be falsified. Russian troops would be forced to carry out production. However, the declaration of martial law by the Polish government itself was unexpected, and it came to many as a shock. One of the illusions destroyed by Jaruzelski's actions has been the role of the Polish army.

[11.](#) “The Lessons of Poland,” *Monthly Review*, February 1971, p. 4.

[12.](#) Soon three additional demands were added to the original two: the erection of a monument to the workers killed in the shipyard strikes of

1970, cancellation of the meat price increase, and the right to form independent unions. Later the five demands were expanded and became the famous 21 points of Gdansk.

[13.](#) Ibid., *Solidarity*, p. 172.

[14.](#) In all likelihood, Pienkowska is today one of the 200 women activists placed in concentration camps by Jaruzelski.

[15.](#) *The Guardian*, "Opinion and Analysis," March 10, 1982, p.18.

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Breaker Morant Quibbling over imperialism

by Stephen Crafts

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BREAKER MORANT stands as a fascinating example of how different cultures make different sense of the same film.⁽¹⁾ In Australia almost all critics hailed it in terms of a proud nationalism. In England they gave it a generally favorable, sometimes patronizing reception and occasionally took exception to its anti-Britishness. In the United States, most critics evoked comparisons with Vietnam, a connection made by very few Australian or British critics.

Having spent most of my life in England, some time in the United States and the last two years in Australia (and I aim to stay here), I was curious, not to say astonished, at the uncritical and passionate Australian responses to BREAKER MORANT. Ever since Jack Thompson won the 1980 Cannes Award for Best Supporting Actor for his role as Major Thomas, it has been almost treasonous to criticize the film.⁽²⁾ European approval seemed to set up BREAKER MORANT as the Australian film of the 1980s (prior to GALLIPOLI) and certainly as the glory of the 1970s Australian film renaissance, celluloid proof of the industry's "maturity." After Cannes, the film proceeded to scoop nine out of thirteen of the Australian Film Awards, Australia's version of Oscars.

Even by the standards of mainstream film reviewing/ criticism, which accepts notions of art's autonomy from the political, BREAKER MORANT should have had a rougher time than it did at the typewriters of Australian and other critics. The film is arguably an actors' tour de force, but cinematically dull. The courtroom segments betray their stodgy stageplay origins. Much of any emotional intensity generated by the use of close ups is dissipated by the predictability of the shot/ reverse shot patterns and of cuts invariably cued to changes of speaker. Occasional ellipses, as when Handcock is (not) told his sentence, slightly alleviate an otherwise ponderous exercise. The principal means of 'opening out' the courtroom drama comes from flashbacks, whose frequency produces a sufficiently fluid overlay on the central drama to allow for the incorporation of the regimental band as a kind of

metaphor. Yet the film is never more formally adventurous than this trite metaphor. In the flashbacks themselves, the image constantly, servilely, illustrates the voice over. Epic pretensions emerge in a few too many slightly upward-angle, pseudo-monumental compositions. The plot itself is creakily predictable, and the characterization hardly complex enough to compensate.

Why such patriotic self-congratulation — especially since it seems largely to have been sparked off by Cannes imprimatur? First, in the words of director Bruce Beresford, “You have to realize that the Australians have never really seen their history on the screen before.”⁽³⁾ *BREAKER MORANT* is virtually the first Australian feature film to broach questions of the country's double colonial heritage: European settlers established supremacy over a native people, and those colonizers in turn were dominated by Britain.

Second, the Australian critical adulation of the film bespeaks a still colonized mind, one which not only acknowledges its own work only when others have praised it but also accepts a stultifying and colonial version of its own history. “Cultural cringe” is the name given to this strange post-colonial disease. Whatever we can do, you — provided that you're white and preferably speak English — can do better. What began as genuflection directed at almost anything British and many things West European over the last two decades shifted somewhat towards the United States. The terms of U.S. cultural and economic imperialism in Australia are such that the average U.S. Citizen does not even know where Australia is; but the Average Australian Citizen knows more about U.S. Western heroes than about Ned Kelly, and is more accustomed to *Kojak* and *Charlie's Angels* than to their Australian counterparts.

Numerous Australian critics have claimed that *BREAKER MORANT* offers a serious reflection on Australian history. In fact the film rests content with trading political-historical analysis for dramatized moralities. And these are the basis of the film's much-vaunted “Australianness.”

Embodied in its characters, the film's moralities are evident from a plot summary. The film centers on three Lieutenants — an expatriate Briton, “Breaker” Morant (Edward Woodward), and two Australians, Handcock (Bryan Brown) and Whitton (Lewis Fitz-Gerald) — who have volunteered to fight for the British in 1901 against the Boers (Dutch settlers in South Africa fighting against British control). Members of a largely Australian anti-guerrilla unit, the Bushveld Carbineers, they face a court-martial for shooting Boer prisoners. This comes despite orders which had been actually issued — if only orally. They become colonial scapegoats in a political maneuver spelled out early in the film: British Commander-in-Chief, Lord Kitchener (Alan Cassell), moves to appease the German Kaiser. By pointing to three wild colonial boys who flout wartime codes of conduct and are duly court-martialed, he can deny the Germans a pretext for entering the war on the Boers' side. The show trial has a predictable outcome.

The film rests on twofold repression. It shares the most obvious repression with war films and recruiting ads: repression of women. The Australian Film Awards for Best Performances by Actresses in Leading and Supporting Roles went to other films. *BREAKER MORANT* offers almost nothing female beyond decorous figments of macho and poetaster fantasy: the consorts, respectively, of Handcock and Morant. The film's repression of women seems as natural as the sexual division of labor in conventional warfare. As the film shows it, while the Boer men fight, their wives lust after the odd handsome Australian. The sole exception is a Boer woman who distracts a British sentry to facilitate a surprise attack: woman, here, acts only to deceive. Anecdotally, the loudest laughs at both evening screenings I attended in central Sydney were raised by Handcock's line: "A slice off a cut loaf's never missed." *BREAKER MORANT*'s virtual exclusion of women in any terms other than sexist helps consolidate the film's Australian values of mateship and manliness.

BREAKER MORANT's other repression is historical. The film represents three groups engaged in fighting the Boer War: the Boers, the British, and their irregulars, the Bushveldt Carbineers. The historical, military, economic and political existence of Black Africans is totally erased. The Boers are physically present, but historically absent. They may be glimpsed, but any viewpoint they may have — political, economic, ideological or even moral — is simply never depicted. When shown, the Boers always appear bearded, scruffy and shifty-looking. Only once is a Boer fighter ever heard to speak, and then in Dutch, denying having shot Captain Hunt (Terence Donovan). By effectively overlooking the Boers, the film can more easily rewrite history in terms of a morality play.

Once the Boers are removed from history, *BREAKER MORANT* structures our sympathies along very clear lines. While aligning us against the scheming Kitcheners, the film has us side not with the Boers but with three members of a counter-terrorist and largely Australian fragment of the British Army. We are invited to hate Kitchener's lies, hypocrisy and political opportunism from the standpoint of the male scapegoats for those politics. Our heroes seem honest, forthright, courageous, manly, and stoic as they are betrayed by the British high command they have so loyally served. Especially when reinforced by Handcock's irreverence and non-conformity, these traits add up to something very close to the Australian self-image, to the "Australian character," to the "manliness, comradeship and sardonic dignity" noted by Australian critic Bob Ellis.[\(4\)](#)

There are three problems with presenting such characteristics as heroic. First is the obvious sexism. Second, this creates a negatively defined identity, constituted not on its own terms but solely in terms of knuckling under to the British Imperials. Third, to promote the underdog, the Aussie battler, brings the "Australian character" perilously close to gallows humor. These traits enlist sympathy for our heroes, ensure a good laugh at corrupt authority, but do nothing to challenge that authority's real bases. To lionize the three lieutenants'

doomed defiance is to make a jingoistic virtue out of characteristics that perpetuate the ruling order. Film heroism, after all, rests on identification with characters. When these characters are shot or imprisoned, the film offers nothing more than a pointlessly diffuse elegy. Identification then denies any consideration of alternatives and precludes analysis of situations in any terms other than those the narrative sets.

The film's squeezing the Boers out has political and cultural implications. These implications could argue a different conception of Australianness. *BREAKER MORANT* overlooks the political and cultural similarities between Boer in South Africa and Australian in Australia. Both cultures were colonized by the British; both live with the aftermath of that oppression. Both lie in the Southern hemisphere but both are Eurocentric. Both are — if differently — racist. To compare these two cultures, or just to represent Boers sympathetically for Australians, could have been highly instructive.

Instead of examining or even broaching such issues, however, *BREAKER MORANT* elicits viewing a representation of the Boer War from the imperialists' political and cultural standpoint. Even if the film does quibble over the imperialists' morality, it barely questions their right to be in South Africa. It mentions British concentration camps and their killing civilians, women, and children only in passing. And it never shows, let alone analyzes, what imperialism means for people's everyday life. We see this last issue dealt with only in the travesty of the Boer women who dutifully await the macho hero, Handcock. The three heroes may bitterly resent their treatment by the British. But insofar as they accept war as a job and do not criticize the imperialism they are fighting and dying for, they endorse British political/ cultural values. Some eighty years after Federation (Australia became a Federation of States, and thus an independent Commonwealth in 1901, the year in which the film is set) we are called upon to identify with the British imperialist culture. Yet it had oppressed the Boers and had its counterpart in Britain's colonizing Australia and still has its parallel in British imperialism in Australia. In the context of such cultural displacements, it is no mere irony that the film creates a paragon of the "Australian character" by means of an expatriate Briton, Morant, played by a British actor, Edward Woodward.

BREAKER MORANT denies the Boers any valid historical force; this is vital (or, more accurately, deadly) for the film's conception of justice. The shooting of Boer prisoners or civilians "suspected" of being Boer sympathizers becomes an issue in the film only insofar as it affects the drama between irregular soldiers and the British high command, not as it affects the Boers (or others) the soldiers may kill. The questions are then reduced to two: Were our heroes right to follow orders? Were the British wrong to deny having issued those orders? Given the film's simplicity — compared to *PATHS OF GLORY* or *KING AND COUNTRY* — the moral surface of these questions is barely touched and more than ample time is left for righteous indignation. Preempted is any serious

consideration of the justice of shooting Boer prisoners or suspects, surely the major issue the film touches on. The film encourages the kind of thinking which produced *My Lai*. Such crucial issues of twentieth century warfare are safely tidied away as asides by the black-and-white moralizing of the courtroom drama.

Moreover, this genre guarantees precise narrative resolution and a strong narrative drive towards that end: How can we imagine alternative (hi)stories when the film glides so irresistibly towards its foregone conclusion? The justice theme becomes uprooted from any real (historical) context by means of two aspects of Morant's characterization. The first is his idealization. Compare the filmic version with Morant's biographer's account:

"A confidence man, a cheat, a bare-faced liar, possibly the greatest male chauvinist pig of all time, an exhibitionist, a racist and a sadist."[\(5\)](#)

Second, the individualist's justification for shooting the Boer, Visser (Michael Procanin) moves along lines identical to the revenge moralities of many a Western: Visser is suspected of killing Morant's close friend Hunt, to whose sister Morant is engaged. Visser's execution epitomizes how story supplants history. Instead of shots of the dying Boer, Visser, we see Morant suffering his righteous fury in having that man killed. Similarly, the impact of Hancock's killing of the German missionary, Reverend Hesse (Bruno Knez), becomes cushioned by the elegant introductory long shots, the comfortably composed dead Hesse, and the narrative context placing of killing as a kind of sexual hors d'oeuvre. In the face of Morant's or Hancock's personalized urgency we have little room for logical argument or serious historical or political analysis. In the context of so heavily predestined a narrative, any alternative action to such killings remains unthinkable. With justice so manifestly on Morant's side, how could we ever interpret him as Lieutenant William Calley's prototype?

How, then, does *BREAKER MORANT* manage such votes for the warmongers, while appearing to be so pacifist and Australian? What, in other words, underpins the film's cultural displacements? The problem concerns Australian cultural identity. Bob Ellis provides us with a symptom when he writes:

"It's not the Poms [British] who should be kept out of our industry. They have a historical right to be there. They are a part of our society — as are the Greeks, the Italians and the Chinese. It's the Americans who are not us and never will be."[\(6\)](#)

But we might ask by what "historical right" Ellis can assimilate the British into his multicultural vision and exclude the United States? This amounts to saying that British colonialism is OK, but U.S. imperialism is not, when for Australia the latter is a recent counterpart of the former. In between — if we are to believe Ellis — must lie a history of

institutionalized amnesia. *BREAKER MORANT*, like Ellis, contributes to that amnesia. The film tells us nothing of the history by which Australia, having been founded in European imperialism over other lands and people and subsequently left culturally underdeveloped by British colonialism, has failed to come to terms with that experience and now still suffers from cultural cringe. Squeezing the Boers out from the film makes it difficult to see the need even to construct that history. Australian feature films have yet to construct that history.

Such are the consequences of *BREAKER MORANT*'s reducing the political to the simply moral. And the simply moral is grandly aestheticized: The film shows us how to die nobly, as Australian mates in front of an exquisite sunrise. Compositions, color and, indeed, acting offer such beautiful experiences — over and above the narrative dynamic and identificatory characterization — that we need hardly worry about the film's political implications. Art, as schools tell us, is quite separate from politics.

Lastly, two caveats. It might be objected that art (*BREAKER MORANT* does appear to be deemed art rather than entertainment) creates fiction, that the artist rightfully projects his or her own "vision" of the world. I don't, obviously, deny Bruce Beresford — if he be the lone artist concerned — the right to his views; I merely suggest that in Australia in the early 1980s more progressive comments could be made about the Boers, Australia, and war. It might equally be objected that art serves to relieve us of the drudgery of everyday reality, that we should not seek to know in art the unpleasantness of life. I suggest that such views deny the possibility that society might be improvable. To maintain that *BREAKER MORANT* does not affect people's ideas about war or Australia is like pretending that kids don't want to see more TV violence. What has to be asked is, Why does this the situation exist? How might it be changed?

Notes

[1.](#) This is a revised version of an article which originally appeared in *Cinema Papers* (Australia), No. 30 (December-January 1980-81).

[2.](#) Apart from me, I know of only one other reviewer in the whole country who took serious issue with the film: Kathe Boehringer in *Australian Left Review*, No. 76 (June 1981).

[3.](#) Quoted by David Robinson, "Beresford's New Australian Cinema," *The Times* (London), 23 October 1980.

[4.](#) *Nation Review* (Australia), October 1980.

[5.](#) Russel Ward, quoted by Jack Clancy in his review of the film in *Cinema Papers*, No. 28 (August-September 1980).

[6.](#) Ellis, op cit.

Editors' Note: JUMP CUT also recommends the extended discussion of BREAKER MORANT to be found in *Critical Arts Monograph*, No. I, on BREAKER MORANT. The monograph is available for \$2 from Peter Davis, Villon Films, Brophy Rd., Hurleyville NY 12747. *Critical Arts* is a radical South African media journal; overseas sub. \$6. Write c/o Journalism/ Media Studies, Rhodes University, PO Box 94, Grahamstown, 6140, South Africa.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Films on Central America For our urgent use

by Julia Lesage

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Introduction to Third World Film Special Section:
Art, Culture, Politics
— the Editors

Third World cinema cannot be considered apart from imperialism. In this issue we have clustered under the title "Third World Cinema" articles on films by feature filmmakers from Third World countries, on filmmaking within the revolution in El Salvador, on a widely used film on infant formula made by Europeans to combat multinational corporate marketing practices, on a filmmaking and distribution collective in the United States, and on films used in the United States to organize support for Central American liberation struggles. Taken together, these films and filmmakers represent an oppositional film practice to worldwide capitalist institutions of filmmaking and film distribution.

Ousmane Sembene, two of whose films are analyzed in depth here, is a Senegalese filmmaker, who has denounced European and U.S. dominance of African production and distribution networks. He has committed himself to making films in his people's native languages that reflect their social and political concerns. Not coincidentally, his films' themes are specifically political, specifically anti-imperialist. Similarly, working in opposition to Western-oriented European and Hollywood cinema, Yilmaz Güney in his film *UMUT* offers a critical look at the lives of the poor in Turkey. And Lucia Lieras, Salvadoran camera person of a feature-length cinema verité look at life in a liberated zone of El Salvador, discusses how actually being inside as a participant in a Third World national liberation struggle affects the filming done about that struggle.

In the United States, films are commonly used in anti-imperialist support work. One of the main distributors of such films, Third World Newsreel, has also had as an ongoing, ten-year long project teaching filmmaking skills to minorities in the United States, people whose point of view is

not represented by mainstream media here. Christine Choy of Third World Newsreel describes that group's work. Reviewed here is BOTTLE BABIES, a film widely used here to expose Nestle's genocidal marketing practices in selling infant formula in the Third World. And for our urgent use, as the Reagan administration steps up its military aide to Central American governments, are a wide range of films available here on Nicaragua and El Salvador, which are described and compared to television's depiction of events in those areas.

Writing about Third World film often demands a different methodology and a treatment of other concerns than writing about mainstream film does. Not only are the achievements of a given Third World filmmaker to be described, but in addition both that country's political situation and mainstream media's treatment of/ impact on that area must be analyzed. Guises of neutrality fall. Both Third World filmmakers and those writing about them are called by their very subject to take an activist stand.

Films on Central America

For our urgent use

by Julia Lesage

(With the assistance of Doug Eisenstark, Julianne Burton, Ruby Rich, Nicaragua Communicates, and activists in the Chicago area doing Nicaragua and El Salvador support work. These people provided the descriptions of the films I was not able to see.)

When someone goes to see a left-oriented film, slideshow, or videotape about Nicaragua or El Salvador, that act represents a judgment and a decision. The judgment is that the U.S. mass media are not offering enough information or only filtered and distorted information about Central America. The decision is that we need to do things to keep ourselves better informed. Much of the organizing being done around support for revolution in El Salvador and Nicaragua begins from this generally felt public need. People turn away from establishment media to other sources to find more complete analyses of Central American politics.

In the Vietnam era, a flourishing alternate left and feminist press and radio as well as film were important vehicles for providing information around Southeast Asia. Films and slide shows offered occasions to bring people together for militant action. Now alternative cinema seems to play an even more important role in organizing work, since more films are available now, especially about El Salvador and Nicaragua, than were then about Vietnam.⁽¹⁾ Looking toward the future, the widespread distribution of video recorders in homes, bars, schools and other places across the country points to a potential radical media source, videotape cassette, that has yet to be fully used and explored.

North American, European, and Latin American filmmakers made the

films listed here.[\(2\)](#) Some of the Latin American made films come from directly within the struggle and were made by nationals. For example, DECISION TO WIN was filmed in Morazan, a zone of El Salvador controlled by revolutionary forces, by an all Salvadoran crew. In general, the Latin American filmmaker has a different, more intimate relation to the subject matter of Central American revolution than a U.S. or European filmmaker does. In this regard, for example, two Costa Ricans in Nicaragua in 1977, Antonio Yglesias and Victor Vega, produced a detailed view of life in a mountain guerrilla camp that took time to linger over men and women bearing arms eating lunch outdoors; this sequence demonstrated both the social structure and the texture of the combatants' daily life. Thus Vega and Yglesias' film, PATRIA LIBRE O MORIR (FREE HOMELAND OR DEATH), reveals in both its pace and eye for detail a cinematic sensibility different from that of European and North American filmmakers, whose films are often shaped by the demands of their country's television industry and do not demonstrate so vividly the dimensions of a Latin culture in its various facets.

Beyond informing us about the political situation, these films taken together provide a body of work that has specific use for film and communications studies. When various films about a country such as Nicaragua or El Salvador are shown in a series or cluster, in effect, the films comment on each other. Different aesthetic approaches between the Latin American-made ones and the others become visible. Political differences also emerge. And these political difference are expressed both in the kind of content dealt with and in the stylistic, cinematic decisions made in structuring the films. The films themselves, as indicated in the suggestions for using them, "speak" differently to different audiences — a fact to which the organizers currently using the film testify. For these reasons, the films taken together raise crucial issues for film theory and aesthetics — especially about the stylistic construction and use of militant documentary films across international lines.

Considering how to present history on film has long preoccupied documentary filmmakers.[\(3\)](#) It remains a complex topic debated in film theory. Currently many filmmakers are filming repression and revolution in Central America, including Latin American revolutionary filmmakers, European and North American sympathizers with the revolution, and television reporters paid by major networks. Contemporary revolution takes place within the context of a "wired planet," for better or for worse. The question of how to document history has become an issue of how to know, and film, the present. In particular, the films listed here raise aesthetic and political questions about what it means if revolutionaries are the subjects or objects of study, subjects or objects within a film.

Anyone who sees these films here can immediately compare them to North American television and U.S. government pronouncements about Latin America. The news and the government seem to have no memory. Just a short while ago, our government hoped Argentina's military

forces would provide a potential strike force against the Salvadoran revolution. But Argentina has used its army to occupy the Malvinas (Falkland Islands), and the U.S. government supported Britain. The television news media seemed to forget or at least downplay this ironic contradiction, just as it forgot Vietnam after the last Marines flew out of Three Mile Island after the "hydrogen bubble" went down.⁽⁴⁾ El Salvador news was neglected during the Argentine-British war, but the day Argentina surrendered, June 15, news announcements told us the United States was sending ten planes to El Salvador to "replace" its air force. What had been going on in El Salvador in the meantime?

The U.S. media respond to the government's, especially the State Department and Pentagon's, manipulation of the press. Government officials provide a calculated flow of information, which is a mixture of predigested facts and deliberate lies, to the news media so as to test the climate of opinion here. Often this takes the form of "reliable inside sources" giving out "leaks" about planned government actions. This way, the government can gauge current popular resistance to its long-term strategy of intervening in Third World political affairs. Furthermore, State Department officials repeat certain strategically useful lies, such as those about Soviet "manipulation" of the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran revolutions, over and over, cynically, with no substantial proof. By inundating news conferences and leaks to the press with the same simplistic anticommunist line, the U.S. government guarantees that its position always figures prominently in newspaper headlines and television news.

Within the U.S. government itself, arguments — crucial ones — about how reliable the information we have from Latin America is shape U.S. foreign policy and Congressional reaction to that policy. More important, in its covert action policy, the CIA has a tremendous monetary and tactical investment in directly manipulating Central American newspapers,⁽⁵⁾ the Latin American Press Association, and U.S. press and television treatments of "human rights" issues (e.g., to find human rights violations supposedly occurring in Nicaragua but not to dwell on the massive ones visible in Haiti).

If the U.S. government calculatedly manipulates the information it provides to the news media here, correspondingly, as large-scale corporate enterprises, the mass media challenge that information only to a limited degree and always within the parameters of mainstream or hegemonic discourse. In particular, the news media give an immense amount of space to dialogue conducted between heads of states, and to official governmental business conducted among capitalist countries. Witness the television time allocated to cover Duarte's visit to the U.S. or to the Salvadoran elections. Far less news time is given to images of genocidal government repression in El Salvador, the U.S. manipulation of Salvadoran politics in the weeks following the elections, or the U.S. government's role in maintaining Florida-based counterrevolutionary training camps staffed by Somoza supporters and Cuban exiles. Nor is news space commonly allocated to socialist countries' successes, such as

social gains in Cuba and Nicaragua.

In addition to its daily news programs, television offers other kinds of documentary programs, which viewers turn to if they want more information about international affairs. Programs like 60 MINUTES analyze "colorful" social problems, often from a human-interest point of view. From time to time, international issues, especially those affecting U.S. electoral politics, get aired on a "special." Most often, information about foreign countries is dealt with in "situation" reports on NIGHTLINE, NBC WHITE PAPERS, CBS REPORTS, or the McNEILL-LEHRER REPORT. The ideological bias and structural limits of such situation reports can be seen from the example of a recent McNEILL-LEHRER REPORT (May 4, 1982) about the Salvadoran government's decision to halt agrarian reform.

"Debating" were U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador Deane Hinton (defending the newly elected Salvadoran government), University of Washington Law Professor Roy Prostermann (regretting that the third stage of land reform giving land to the migrant peasant labor force had been officially abandoned), and U.S. Senator from Connecticut, Christopher Dodd (explaining why the current abrogation of land reform in El Salvador meant we should curtail military aid to that country). None of the speakers discussed either how the military took possession of the land from the landed aristocracy during the *first phase of land reform* in El Salvador, nor the pretext this then offered the military to terrorize the peasantry. Nor did the speakers discuss the very real contradiction among the Salvadoran ruling class between the rich who lost land (many of whom are now in Florida) and the nouveau riche military officers who gained it. Ironically — and, of course, not mentioned in this program — Roy Prostermann, who took a liberal stance here, authored not only the agrarian reform program in El Salvador but that of South Vietnam, where his 1968 strategic hamlet program similarly became a pretext for the military to use brutal force to "pacify" an oppressed peasantry and force them into urban areas so as to undercut the VietCong's popular rural support. (6) Liberal and conservative positions, as aired on these television situation reports, too often cover up both the contradictions and the structural realities of the international issue being discussed.

What we need to see and what television does not offer us is the depiction and analysis of Latin American reality as the majority of Latin Americans — the peasantry and the poor — experience it. That reality has overwhelmingly been shaped in Central America by the historical fact of U.S. imperialism — an imperialism worked out in economic, cultural, and political/ military terms. Not only does the media industry in the United States eschew depicting and analyzing imperialism, even more it makes invisible the structures of resistance and the people's struggle to shape their own history.

It is precisely this "will of the people," this rising up against repression, that Central American revolutionary movements have to offer to the left

in North America and Europe. In a very sophisticated way, the revolutionary forces in Nicaragua and El Salvador have demonstrated their capacity to work in coalitions and with institutions that are revolutionary at the base but not at the top, such as the Catholic Church. It will be to our political benefit if we can enter into a dialogue with representatives of these forces in a far more concrete analytic and personal exchange, and hopefully future films will contribute more to this kind of dialogue.

Currently, the media developed by alternative left and feminist groups here provide a necessary corrective to the half-information and misinformation coming from newspapers and television news. The films described here are usually seen in alternative viewing situations, which include discussions after the screening and literature for sale. One purpose of such screenings is to teach viewers how to *continue* to keep themselves better informed, which includes understanding the value of left films and the left press. It is not a question of the bourgeois media's lying and the alternative media's magically providing some kind of "objective truth." Rather these films indicate a different way of getting at the truth. A left perspective characteristically includes analyzing the international situation of the poor and working classes and people's struggles against oppression. Media produced within such struggles has more at stake in pursuing a complete and accurate analysis than does the media produced for capitalist television. Those of us who are committed to social change know that the truth makes us more effective. And whenever we are involved in a struggle, the struggle itself teaches us new ways of thinking about our situation. As a feminist, I understand that how our struggles to change sex roles have led women activists to construct *new knowledge* about those roles. In the same way, the films listed here all depend on Central American revolutionary movements and are part of that struggle, even if made by North Americans and Europeans and distributed only here.

Discussions after showings of these films often promote a sense among the audience of a need to act. Collective actions such as teach-ins and demonstrations are often planned following an initial film screening. The organizer may have suggestions about writing Congresspeople. Often cards are available for viewers to fill out that authorize one telegram a month to be sent in the viewer's name. These films are used to provide basic education about and elicit sympathy for oppressed peoples. In terms of an audience response, the films may have as their goal to motivate viewers to act against U.S. intervention in Central America. Yet, when most effective, discussions following the films move beyond these limited goals. Spectators with more knowledge or personal experience in Central America often contribute information that helps audiences understand these revolutionary movements in greater depth. At this moment in history, because Central America lies in such close proximity to the United States, and because we benefit from a widespread knowledge of Spanish here, dialogue and interaction between the U.S. movement (feminist, gay, anti-racist, left) and the revolutionary movements in El Salvador and Nicaragua become an

exciting new possibility. Within this perspective, we should keep in mind that discussions following film showings which explore the widest range of political issues will help build the broadest anti-imperialist movement in the United States

Teachers can also effectively use these films. Into almost any course in the social sciences, communications, or the humanities, a "unit" can be built about contemporary Central America, dealing with the reality of the situation, what people in the United States know about it and how they get their information, and what can be done. A pedagogic reward comes when students gain interest in dealing with a contemporary topic obviously important to them. Furthermore, since some of these films have been made by anglo filmmakers and others by Latin Americans, the resulting cinematic differences and emphases are of particular value for film students to observe and analyze. In this way, communications students can arrive at a greater understanding of the relation between the filmmakers' cultural background, the audience's cultural background and political development, and distinct forms of cinematic expression. These films shown against the news (news programs can be captured off television with a video recorder) offer very rich curriculum material to any teacher of history, Spanish, sociology, political science, or mass communications — since television news mediates many people's understanding of social process.

Students can use these same tactics — to alter what might otherwise be an unsatisfying curriculum — by viewing these films and writing on them for class projects and term papers. Many local support groups for Nicaragua and El Salvador own one or more films and will gladly share their resources. Progressive teachers can and should rent films and speakers from these support groups so as to further their anti-imperialist work.

The films listed here offer crucial organizing, teaching and consciousness raising tools. At the same time, as films they have certain limitations — political and aesthetic — that are important for viewers and especially for organizers of the screenings to consider. In particular, the films often restrict themselves politically to a left liberal politics of noninvolvement, as seen in the demand, "U.S. out of El Salvador." Such a stance characterizes the television documentary style of the films most used by movement organizers in the United States. These are the films made by U.S. and European filmmakers. At the same time, the films that we have seen from Latin American filmmakers too often use an imagery and structure which reveal the filmmakers' lack of reflection on the sexual-political dimensions of both the revolutionary struggle and filmmaking itself.

These are real political limitations. Many films most often used do not analyze the genesis and structures of imperialism, nor the repressive structures of national dependent capitalism in the Third World. Instead, the films often concentrate on images of repression or offer testimonies by useful, "accredited" liberal authorities — such as ex-ambassador

White from El Salvador. These films, especially the U.S. and European-made ones on El Salvador, plead against U.S. military intervention, a plea which really builds on an old-style appeal to U.S. isolationism in foreign policy. Furthermore, too often the films fail to examine either the structure of the revolutionary forces, or what these forces could teach us about tactics of resistance to economic and racial oppression within the United States

Many such films are made with an eye to getting on U.S. television, on the more liberal educational or public television stations. Although these films, such as *EL SALVADOR: ANOTHER VIETNAM* and *AMERICAS IN TRANSITION* have a great deal of cinematic polish and present their points effectively and clearly, their format is conventional and perhaps too easily digestible. Films like these made in a television-documentary style are characterized by an essay-like argumentative structure and often use maps, charts, authorities, lists, and captioned portraits. North American and European viewers find this organization comfortably familiar with its interviews, voices-over, authoritative narrator, and comparison and contrast editing.

Nevertheless, the format itself is ideological and hides certain things. For example, it often reduces to generalities the voices of Latin American revolutionary organizers and peasant fighters; rarely do they speak the analysis that shapes the film. Furthermore, the form assumes images are self-explanatory. Thus, we do not get to learn from those images how *different* Latin American culture is from our own, i.e., the uniqueness of the social organization of the culture from which those images emanate. If we can assume that we "know" the connotations of an image, let us say, of a child with a rifle just as soon as we see it, if that is the way the film uses that image — flatly, as self-explanatory — then we are not taught what that image means to the people among whom the child lives.

Like television news, these films also do not demonstrate the structural nature of capitalism and imperialism. Beyond providing the shiver of viewing tortured and mutilated bodies, this kind of filmmaking does not challenge viewers sufficiently when it asks them only to struggle against direct U.S. governmental intervention abroad. CIA ties with the AFL-CIO, for example, and the willing collaboration of the AFL-CIO in undermining labor unions, communist analyses and organizing in the Third World is the kind of structural contradiction inherent in U.S. capitalism that the television documentary cannot explore. We need films that demonstrate how and why we should ally ourselves with the liberation forces themselves. And if this is a film's goal, it will not likely get on U.S. television.

In a sense, movement organizers can justify wanting visual media made in a familiar format — so as not to "confuse" the audience, to make memorable points, etc.. But the ideological restrictions of that format are rarely challenged by those who use the film. This poses a dilemma not only for organizers but also for political filmmakers, who need to

question at what point they would create an aesthetic break and make audiences confront new forms. It is a crucial issue, for without stylistic innovation, the filmmaker may not be able to express politically what s/he understands the solidarity movement needs.

The films commonly judged most effective as organizing tools are those made primarily for North Americans or European audiences by filmmakers familiar with these countries' media conventions, especially their television conventions. Films made by Latin Americans on the revolutionary struggle often elicit a different and even unsympathetic response from anglo audiences than from latino ones. Certain connotative details and rhythms of presenting material cinematically seem to make more sense to audiences in a Spanish-speaking environment than in an English-speaking one. For example, what a North American film audience may interpret as an image connoting "poverty" may signify "a farm family's daily life" in its country of origin.

In general, elements in Latin American films that most distress U.S. viewers are those that seem to connote "militarism" or "left rhetoric." In *EL SALVADOR: EL PUEBLO VENCERÁ* made by the Film Institute of Revolutionary El Salvador, we see many images of young people with rifles and red face masks — images which have been criticized here as glorifying militarism. As was discussed by Michael Chanan in his review of the film in *JUMP CUT*, no. 26, these images of taking up arms and active military participation in the guerrillas are presented with eyes of love by Latin American militant filmmakers and are images that connote "the people's will." Yet understanding the emotion with which such images are invested is often difficult for U.S. left and feminist viewers to comprehend.

In fact, images of people who have suffered oppression now bearing arms have a liberating function in Central America. They serve as images of empowerment for people who have not previously had social, political, or cultural power. Nicaragua and Cuba's example serves a similar function as an image of a country which successfully fought a war of liberation and which proceeded after that to effect social and economic revolution. And within Cuba and Nicaragua themselves, images of guns and martyrdom still have an emotional force. Political and cultural leaders are not seen just as politicians or functionaries; they are revered as those who made the revolution. Ordinary people in Cuba and Nicaragua understand the U.S. government's intent to destroy their social gains. When I was in Nicaragua last November, one woman explained her version of "military imagery" like this:

"When your tanks come rolling in, I want to meet them with a gun, not without one. Whoever conquers us will find only a cemetery, because we all will have died defending what our loved ones have already paid for with their lives."

In Nicaragua, the call to the citizenry to participate in the popular militia evokes a sense of both national and personal pride, especially among women, for over half of the Nicaraguan popular militia is

women.

Genocide, usually paid for by U.S. military assistance, already exists in Central America. For poor people in El Salvador and Guatemala, massacre by government troops and government-paid paramilitary organizations is too commonplace a reality, one only alluded to and not fully described in our "news." For the exploited, public images of armed resistance to genocide empower them psychologically and socially. Such images, deriving from the work of armed revolutionary organizations whose members live among the peasantry, help poor people believe that it is not necessary or "natural" to live under an exploitative regime. Such images are part of the building of an alternative, revolutionary culture, which teaches people to understand how they can take power over their own lives.

In his key essay, "Concerning Violence," Frantz Fanon contrasts international capitalism's institutionalized violence with Third World armed struggles to seize state power.⁽⁷⁾ What Fanon explains is how only the act of bearing arms adequately expresses the oppressed's submerged anger. At the moment of revolution, it is the principal cure for the colonized mind. How do oppressed people come to understand that large-scale social change is possible? How do they come to *will* it? For many Central American peasants, these are recent possibilities, ones developed by the revolutionary culture as it enters people's lives.

In the film *EL SALVADOR: EL PUEBLO VENCERÁ* (THE PEOPLE WILL WIN), made by Latin American filmmakers, a small boy speaks a militant eulogy over his murdered father's grave. Then he formally joins the guerrilla forces. Some U.S. viewers have interpreted this sequence as "staged" or "rhetorical." In fact, revolutionary culture, as a way of teaching about social structures and processes of change, is the first twentieth century intellectual vehicle which many Central American workers and peasants, traditionally kept isolated and illiterate, have been exposed to. This is the source of the language the boy in the film uses. Revolutionary culture teaches people a mode of collective Social participation. It is an empowering culture. Its aim is literally empowerment. Guerrilla fighters in the zones they now control in El Salvador have created a space where people do not have to live in ignorance and constant fear; and from this point on, revolutionary consciousness grows exponentially with the people's "decision to win" (the title of the Salvadoran-made film about life in a controlled zone). As Fanon described this phenomenon,

"It is at the moment that he (sic; i.e., the "native") realizes his humanity that he begins to sharpen the weapons with which he will secure his victory."⁽⁸⁾

In Nicaragua I met with a women's group that was formally addressed by Comandante Leticia Herrera. When she entered the room, I understood the force of her presence there as both a national heroine and as the embodiment of a "new woman." Another woman's example similarly affected the group. A Salvadoran participant's strident call for

support caused all the women there to identify with her situation. She intuited that identification as she cried out,

"Our mothers see their children killed; our children see their mothers killed. We fight your battle."

As Margaret Randall described this kind of feminist unity in her book *Sandino's Daughters*, the Nicaraguan women who bear arms are revered because they fought and suffered rape and torture, including seeing their loved ones tortured, to secure the immense social gains other women now have. These women also represent a whole new model of socially, politically, and physically active womanhood that stands in dramatic contrast to the roles for women available in Latin America.⁽⁹⁾ In colonized countries or those with a dependent capitalist economy, peasant women work brutally hard and are imprisoned spiritually by poverty, illiteracy, and machismo. Middle class women often stay isolated in the home, removed from social participation, and face ill health because of a lack of physical culture for women and girls even in the schools. The social image of women participating in the development of the Nicaraguan revolution provides a new icon of "contemporary women." This image, often of women in arms, has a connotative impact which speaks to women in other Third World countries in a way that such an image has not yet done in the United States. The film by Victoria Schultz, *WOMEN IN ARMS*, offers a significant exception as it captures a sense of the exuberance Nicaraguan women feel in their new roles, integral to which is being co-partners in national defense.

Our U.S. military-industrial complex has consistently supported the institutionalized violence which is structurally inherent in colonialism. We have engaged our military forces in Central America innumerable times over the last century to shore up U.S. economic and political domination of that area. To do that we have created alliances with the oppressive national bourgeoisie of each country, such as the coffee oligarchy of El Salvador or the Somoza family in Nicaragua. Central American history always tells the same story: how the U.S. government manipulates other countries' national politics and cooperates militarily with genocidal governments. At this point in our own history, many U.S. citizens mistrust political leaders' pronouncements, aware of how politicians present a line to the mass media, and they feel a sentiment of isolationism as they are unwilling to send U.S. youth abroad to die in an unjust cause. Nevertheless, U.S. viewers who look at images of Latin American peasants in arms and see in them the same iconic significance as images of U.S. soldiers bearing arms or images, tiredly reiterated, of a supposed "communist military threat" should learn to distinguish between people's common reaction to such images here and the common interpretation of those images in the Third World. Fanon presents this distinction as follows:

"Castro, sitting in military uniform in the United Nations Organization, does not scandalize the underdeveloped

countries. What Castro demonstrates is the consciousness he has of the continuing existence of the rule of violence ... Strengthened by the unconditional support of the socialist countries, the colonized peoples fling themselves with whatever arms they have against the impregnable citadel of colonialism ... The violence of the native is only hopeless if we compare it in the abstract to the military machine of the oppressor. On the other hand, if we situate that violence in the dynamics of the international situation, we see at once that it constitutes a terrible menace for the oppressor ... Capitalism realizes that its military strategy has everything to lose by the outbreak of nationalist wars.”[\(10\)](#)

I am asking for a cross-cultural understanding of what bearing arms means in people's lives. It is a crucial issue for both political organizers and people working in contemporary media to deal with. Commercial media and U.S. and European governments manipulate precisely these images and distort them flagrantly to denigrate feminism, gays, and the left. Too often lying headlines scream at us: Supposed "feminists" attempted to kill President Ford. "Rioting" prisoners in Attica were assumed to have "brutally slaughtered" guards. "Palestinian" becomes paired with the word "terrorist." Social gains for workers in Libya become erased under the labels attached to Omar Kadafi. The all-inclusive epithet "terrorism" applies to what the media depicts as the acts of crazy, often disenfranchised individuals or isolated groups, whose behavior then takes up disproportionate media space. In this way, newspapers and television inhibit viewers from looking beyond those images of "disorder" and "insanity" (presumably emanating from a socially irresponsible left) to learn what bearing arms might mean for an oppressed people when armed struggle is a key element in the national movement organized to achieve their liberation.

Television images of the military have a different relation to the public in a country like Nicaragua, where national defense depends on the large popular militia. Citizens learn to bear arms, as they did in North Vietnam. When the people do the soldiering, many ordinary citizens see what is going on militarily, enough to understand the farce of U.S. media pronouncements about Cuban or Soviet control of their armed forces. If we interpret media images of bearing arms as "militarist," we react justifiably against our government's huge economic investment in building a nuclear arsenal and intervening in other countries' affairs. But this is also a culture-bound reaction on our part. In the case of films dealing with Third World revolutionary movements, viewers must learn to go beyond their initial reaction to look at images of military participation in a more complex way, so as to more accurately interpret the social realities these images are intended to convey.

Organizing around issues of U.S. imperialism should be a way of uniting anglo and latino cultures *within* the United States. The burden of extending oneself to understand the other culture falls on the white left.[\(11\)](#) The need to understand Latin American culture on its own

terms often gets bypassed, even within anti-imperialist organizing — and that has to be acknowledged as a form of racism. To make or use films which speak to audiences only in "mainstream" ways is to deny the existence and validity of a Latin American voice right here in our own culture. For non-latino to do anti-imperialist work around El Salvador but not to promote an understanding of the cultural structures and forms of expression of Latin American life is a contradiction that must be surpassed.

At the same time, militant cinema coming from Central America must be criticized for its sexism — both overt and implied. The visual media emerging from the revolutionary forces seem to lag behind the actual participation of women in those revolutions. In both Nicaragua and El Salvador, women hold key positions in the structure of the revolutionary command. Sometimes in the films listed here, female or gay sexuality is used as an icon for "bourgeois decadence." Other times, the political role of women is just left out, as in *ZONA INTERTIDAL*. This film is dedicated to assassinated teachers but uses only male actors, which is inappropriate since three-fourths of the very militant Salvadoran teachers' union are women.

These films are being used for political support work in the U.S. and Europe. Here the relatively advanced development of the women's and gay movements makes it crucial that the visual media used for Latin American support work deal with issues of sexual politics sensitively, both in terms of the themes treated and cinematic style. Otherwise the filmmakers will lose the constituency they wish to recruit. But that is only part of the issue.

The women's and gay movements in these countries have made a contribution to left culture as a whole in delineating how issues of sexual politics interact with all other political issues. If women's participation in the revolution is not dealt with in detail by militant Latin American filmmakers, implicit cinematic sexism once again erases women from history and relegates us to visual icons, static representative images — as mother, girl, decadent, or even armed militant. Feminists have developed a profound cultural analysis, part of which explains how the visual media manipulate, and depend on, the image of women. Feminists also understand how history has been written and filmed either to include, or more likely to exclude, women's specific experience of a given place and time. Over and over again, Third World feminists tell us that their struggle cannot be considered apart from struggles against imperialism, from their own national liberation struggles, from communist revolution.⁽¹²⁾ The militant filmmakers from Latin America, mostly male, who want their films to elicit international support, must listen to these revolutionary feminist voices from within their own struggles and include them more fully in the films.

Audiovisual material does not stand by itself as a teaching device but takes its place within a larger program for educating and motivating viewers. The person or group presenting a film should determine what

values it puts forth and what is needed to supplement it or surround it with to give a more complete understanding of revolutionary situations and the United States' response to them. Frankly discussing a film's limitations before showing it can serve to diffuse routine criticism and let the audience's attention dwell on the strengths the film possesses. Organizers of film showings will want to think about how to introduce Latin American-made films to make them more accessible to anglo audiences, perhaps by talking about unique aspects of Latin culture. Similarly, a Latin American audience in the U.S. may be more accustomed to a highly motivated and emotionally charged presentation, and the U.S. or European-made documentaries may seem dry or emotionally sterile. What to surround the film presentation with — speakers, songs, poetry readings — becomes an organizational and pedagogic decision that shapes how the film will be received. Furthermore, since both the solidarity movement in the United States and the revolutions in El Salvador and Nicaragua are *developing* within the context of an ongoing and hopefully ever more interactive process, we will need different educational tools and to develop different strategies for this solidarity work as the Central American revolution advances. These films and my discussion of them may be historically located at the very beginning of our work.

Note: In writing this resource guide, I have limited myself to films available in the United States and have seen all the ones discussed except those indicated with an * which were included upon the recommendation of teachers and organizers who use them frequently. I have tried to give a general orientation to the film's content, style, and potential audience. It is an open-ended list. In particular, JUMP CUT would like to have as many in-depth reviews of these films as possible. We reviewed some of these films in our last issue and gave a general background on El Salvador and a bibliography there. Please write us about other material that you have seen or used successfully — particularly slide shows and videotapes. We would also like more in depth studies of the news, both here and abroad.

FILMS ON LATIN AMERICA IN GENERAL AND GUATEMALA

AMERICAS IN TRANSITION

(Dir. Obie Benz, U.S. 1982. 16mm, color, 29 mm. Distributor: Americas in Transition.) *

This rapidly paced and tightly edited film, shot in a traditional educational film style, demonstrates that the U.S. government has not limited its covert action in South America to attacking just one country, nor does it happen just in a Republican regime. The film explains patterns of intervention and coverups perpetrated by the United States over the last century. It uses visual material such as shots from newsreels of Marines invading Santo Domingo, the Bay of Pigs, Nixon's Goodwill Tour (where he was pelted with stones and eggs), CIA testimony before Congress, and ex-Ambassador Murat Williams

speaking about El Salvador. The film opens to comment on the media representation of South America, as typified by shots of Carmen Miranda.

The film's limitations are in its use of an authoritative voice-over narration and its dubious choice of authorities. What are we to make of a "nice-guy" ex-CIA chief? The film indicates either that our government made well-meaning mistakes, or that if U.S. citizens only knew what was going on, they would demand that our government's policies change. The film does not explain how a socialist revolution is just.

In the film's national television presentation on PBS, as was done with FROM THE ASHES but to a worse degree, the stations surrounded the film showing with testimony from conservative authorities, who warned that the film was a propagandistic exercise full of factual errors.

The film provides a comprehensive overview. Its brevity makes it especially useful. Suggested audiences would be the general public, those who wish an introduction to U.S. foreign policy, or high schools.

GUATEMALA: MY COUNTRY OCCUPIED (MI PATRIA OCUPADA)
(Dir. Newsreel, U.S. 1971. 16 mm, black and white, 30 min. English or Spanish versions. Distributors: Third World Newsreel, California Newsreel.) *

This is one of the few radical films in distribution here about Guatemala. In it a plantation woman tells how U.S. corporations control her country. Although somewhat outdated, this older film is useful both for its analysis of imperialism and for its depiction of the narrator's life, which makes it appropriate for a women's studies audience.

(Continued on [page 2](#))

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Films on Central America, page 2

For our urgent use

by Julia Lesage

from *Jump Cut*, no. 27, July 1982, pp. 15-20

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FILMS ON EL SALVADOR

EL SALVADOR: ANOTHER VIETNAM

(Dir. Glen Silber and Tete Vasconcellos, U.S. 1981. First version in 3/4" video, color. Updated version, 16mm, color, and 3/4" video, 60 min.

Distribution: Icarus. Many local support groups own a print.)

The first film that many Salvadoran support groups bought prints of and used extensively was EL SALVADOR: REVOLUTION OR DEATH. Now many of these same groups are using EL SALVADOR: ANOTHER VIETNAM. Made in the essayistic, tightly organized style of a television documentary, both films provide a useful informational tool to inform viewers about repression in El Salvador and Salvadoran history.

The title ANOTHER VIETNAM indicates the film's organizing principle; it is set up on a comparison-and-contrast rhetorical model. Newsreel footage of U.S. State Department officials shows them declaring that the U.S. would not commit troops, only advisors, to Vietnam. We see Haig warning that in El Salvador, "Cuban activity has reached a peak." The analogy between Vietnam and El Salvador indicates that U.S. foreign policy consistently counters a revolution in the Third World.

The film contains a well-developed social and historical analysis. Over the last century in El Salvador, coffee and cotton oligarchs, with the cooperation of the Salvadoran government and especially the army, forced the country's landed peasantry to become a migrant labor force, living in abysmal poverty. Within the context of that historical development, the film demonstrates the failure of the Duarte regime's agrarian reform program, in which army officers took much of the newly released land. The growth of the revolutionary forces, particularly the union of all the progressive citizens' organizations in the FDR, is shown, as well as the Catholic Church's role in fighting oppression. Particularly effective is the use of the actual taped voice of Ita Ford, assassinated U.S. religious.

Because of Ita Ford's analysis; the shots of Ana Guadalupe Martinez,

military commander in the FMLN, explaining the people's support for the guerrillas; and the fact that a woman co-directed this film, it has a special use in women's studies classes and would be well paired with FROM THE ASHES: NICARAGUA TODAY, directed by Helena Solberg-Ladd.

EL SALVADOR: THE PEOPLE WILL WIN (EL PUEBLO VENCERÁ)
(Dir. Diego de la Texera and the Film Institute of Revolutionary El Salvador, 1980, El Salvador. 16 mm, color, 100 min. Distribution: Unifilm.) This film was reviewed in JUMP CUT, 26.

The film develops an historical analysis of Salvadoran resistance to oppression, with particular attention paid to the Communist leader of the 1932 peasant rebellion, Augusto Farabundo Martí. It depicts contemporary repression and the growth of the revolutionary forces in El Salvador.

The film has an aesthetic excellence and cinematic innovativeness which makes it ideal for documentary film courses. As I have seen it used, audiences familiar with Latin American culture respond to it most readily. Paired with EL SALVADOR: ANOTHER VIETNAM, it provides an excellent contrast of anglo and latino documentary styles, especially for students of mass communications.

In general, the film's lyricality and emotional force are its strengths. However, a problem of sexism must be dealt with. The camera slowly tilts up from a bourgeois woman's shoes to linger on her hips, clothed in tight blue jeans. To equate bourgeois decadence with openly expressed female sexuality and the female body is an old filmic convention but one that the filmmakers should have known to avoid. Furthermore, this woman does not look much different from a large portion of U.S. working-class women, since here jeans are worn by the entire range of classes. Understandably, the case could be made that in Latin America U.S.-style jeans are worn by the bourgeoisie and those who want to imitate that lifestyle, as opposed to the vast majority of the population — so in the film, this image provides an example of crosscultural code switching. However, the use of a U.S. jazz track at that point, and the *way* the camera moves up the woman's body indicate that "female sexuality" is the supposed pointer to bourgeois decadence.

EL SALVADOR: REVOLUTION OR DEATH
(Dir. Frank Diamond, Holland, 1980. 16mm, color, 48 min. Distributed by Unifilm. Many local support groups own a print.) This film was reviewed in JUMP CUT, 26.

The film documents the genocidal oppression of the government forces and the paramilitary ORDEN and shows the Catholic Church's role in registering and protesting human rights violations. The film has an interview with Archbishop Oscar Romero shortly before his assassination and is especially appropriate to use with church groups.

SEEDS OF LIBERTY

(Dir. and Prod. Glen Silber and Tete Vasconcellos. U.S. 1981. 16mm, color, 28 min. Distributors: Icarus, Maryknoll.)

The film examines the murder of U.S. Maryknoll sisters and layworkers in El Salvador, December 1980. EL SALVADOR: ANOTHER VIETNAM repeats some of the same imagery and interviews found in this film.

Of particular value to women's studies classes is the example of women's strength and courage, heard in the taped voices of the murdered women and in the interviews with Maryknoll sisters admonishing us to remember not the murder of four U.S. citizens but the junta's constant torture and murder of the Salvadoran poor.

MORAZÁN

(Dir. Collective "Cero á la Izquierda," El Salvador, 1980. 16mm, color, 15 min. Distributed by offices of La Comisión de Derechos Humanos de El Salvador. Spanish only.)

In the province of Morazán, a zone controlled by the FMLN, peasants, including children, make arms and learn to handle all kinds of weapons. This cinematically simple depiction of cottage industry demonstrates ways that manufacture of weaponry and military training are of local origin and rural-based, not organized and supplied directly by either Cuba or the USSR.

VIOLENTO DESALOJO (VIOLENT EJECTION)

(Dir. Collective "Cero á la Izquierda," El Salvador, 1980. 16 mm, black and white, 9 min. Spanish only. Distribution: Offices of the Comisión de Derechos Humanos de El Salvador.)

This film is shot from stills, TV interviews, and some live footage about unarmed young people occupying the Christian Democratic Party's headquarters and their subsequent murder. It is both a denunciation of repression and a demonstration of the will to resist.

DECISION TO WIN (LA DECISION DE VENCER)

(Dir. Collective "Cero á la Izquierda," El Salvador, 1981. 16mm, color, 90 min. Distributor: El Salvador Film and Video Projects.)

See interview in this issue with the cameraperson, Lucio Lleras. The film contains images of sugar production, sports, education, religion, and battlefield medicine in a zone controlled by the FMLN.

LA ZONA INTERTIDAL (THE STRAND)

(Dir. Collective "Vago," El Salvador, 1980. 16mm, color, 15 min. Spanish only. Distributor: Comisión de Derechos Humanos de El Salvador.)

Filmed in luminous colors and with subtle camera angles and cutting, this film shows a male body by the sea, the man sitting at his desk at night afraid of noises in the house, and the man very briefly at a demonstration. It is dedicated to Salvadoran teachers. Because of the militancy of the Salvadoran teachers' union, many teachers have been

assassinated, several a month since the end of 1979.

The film is an example of much of 16mm independent cinema in South America, shot silently and dubbed later, and is useful for film studies classes because of its evocative style.

FILMS ON NICARAGUA: ON DAILY LIFE AND/OR RECONSTRUCTION

PARAISO

(Dir. Maryknoll Order, 1976. 16mm, color, 34 min. Spanish or English versions. Free loan. Distributor: Modern Talking Pictures.)

This older film is particularly useful for two reasons. First, the principal figure is Maryknoll priest Miguel D'Escoto, now Nicaragua's Secretary of State. The roots of D'Escoto's revolutionary philosophy are seen in the way he then directed a new housing project, constructed with the social development of its members in mind. D'Escoto is seen trying to convince one of the construction workers and that man's family to move into the new project. Although the rent is very low, they fear they might not be able to pay it if one of them got sick, so they refuse to move, because then to have to move out would mean an insufferable shame.

The film provides a vivid contrast to *FROM THE ASHES*, which focuses on the life of a similar family in 1980. The contrast in the families' living conditions, social integration, political consciousness, and degree of pessimism or optimism indicate the kinds of changes the Nicaraguan revolution has effected in ordinary people's lives.

FROM THE ASHES: NICARAGUA TODAY

(Dir. Helena Solberg-Ladd and the International Women's Film Project, U.S. 1981. 16mm, color, 60 min. Distributor: Document Associates.)

This film looks at contemporary Nicaragua from the perspective of one family. The parents visit two teenage daughters on the literacy campaign because of rumors that the government was teaching children to turn against their parents. The filmmakers trek into the countryside with the parents for an emotional family reunion. We see the family's interactions with their neighbors, and the mother's role in a Catholic discussion group. The film also contains a survey of Nicaraguan history and includes poetry on the sound track (poetry being a vital force in Nicaraguan cultural life). Scenes filmed within a Nicaraguan prison and at a counterrevolutionary training camp in Florida are journalistic coups, and the leading national bourgeois figures within Nicaragua are allowed to state their opposition to the FSLN, the revolutionary party (e.g., "A mixed capitalist and socialist economy will not work because the FSLN is Marxist-Leninist.") The popular mobilization for self-defense is contextualized in terms of U.S. threats against Nicaragua.

The head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, William J. Bennett, denounced the film as propagandistic and not within the scope of the "humanities," and unsuccessfully tried to keep it off television. It

was programmed on public television followed in the Midwest by a lengthy rightwing denunciation by Georgie Anne Geyer. (See editorial in this issue.)

In addition to its use as an organizing tool, this film is good for church groups and women's studies audiences. Its emphasis on daily life lets us see what "revolution" means to the poor and the working class — i.e., most people in Nicaragua.

WOMEN IN ARMS (MUJERES EN ARMAS)

(Dir. Victoria Shultz, U.S. 1980. 16mm, color, 59 min. English or Spanish narration. Distributor: Hudson River Productions.)

This film is beautifully shot and contains many impressive interviews and images of women in the military. Its editing and narration, however, often lack in specificity. That is, the film fails to explain the speakers' backgrounds, the difference between the popular militia and the reserves, laws passed after the revolution limiting women's combat roles, the mass organizations' functioning, or the dynamics of sexism in daily life. The petite figure of Comandante Dora Maria Tellez bespeaks a strength, intellectual clarity, and confidence that are conveyed more by connotation than by an examination of her political development and current political role in the FSLN.

The very title of the film indicates that it will deal with an issue that is problematic for many U.S. women — military participation — and the film often inspires a discussion among women in which their analysis goes far beyond what is in the film. Most effectively the film should be paired with another which shows more of the context of the Nicaraguan revolution.

THESE SAME HANDS

(Dir. Neil Reichline, U.S. 1980. 3/4" video cassette, color, 45 min. 16mm? Distributor: World Focus Films.) *

Nicaragua is seen through its music and poetry, focusing on Ernesto Cardenal, the poet and priest who is now Nicaragua's Minister of Culture.

LOS HIJOS DE SANDINO (CHILDREN OF SANDINO)

(Dir. Kimberly Safford and Fred Barney Taylor. Prod. Kimberly Safford. U.S. 1982. 16mm, color, 42 min. Spanish sound track, but a written English synopsis and translation accompany the film so viewers can read the text before seeing the film. Distributor: Fred Barney Taylor and Kimberly Safford.)

This lyrical experimental film was originally filmed in super-8, principally in Managua during the weeks surrounding the first anniversary of the Sandinista revolution. Optically printed and using a sound track drawn from popular music, interviews, and the radio, the film joyously presents the "fiesta" of the revolution. It offers an intensely visual and emotional glimpse of the folklore and culture of the

Nicaraguan people and of the transformation brought about by revolution.

Produced and co-directed by a woman, it is appropriate for women and film events. It especially will appeal to Spanish-speaking audiences and teachers of experimental and super-8 film classes. It is most effectively shown with a more "explanatory" documentary such as AMERICAS IN TRANSITION or SCENES FROM THE REVOLUTION (also shot in super-8).

AFTER THE REVOLUTION

(Dir. Lourdes Portillo, U.S. 1979. 16mm, black and white, 23 min.

Distributor: Lourdes Portillo.) *

This short dramatic narrative, filmed in an experimental surrealist style, deals with a woman who left Nicaragua to live in San Francisco. Her fiancé from Nicaragua unexpectedly shows up after being released from prison by the dictatorship. The film depicts that psychologically intense moment when they meet at a party and fight over political commitments and women's independence. It offers a valuable psychological portrait, well-acted by nonprofessionals from the latino community.

Useful for Spanish classes and women's studies classes.

THE UPRISING (LA INSURRECCIÓN)

(Dir. Peter Lilienthal, Germany 1980. 35mm and 16mm, color, 96 min.

Distributor: Kino International.)

This is a fictional re-creation of the 1919 insurrection in Leon, where some of the heaviest fighting took place. Effectively using the genre of domestic melodrama, the narrative depicts the tensions in a revolutionary family whose son is in Somoza's army. The final sequences of collective community action taken to storm the barracks and the fleeing army's retaliation with civilian hostages are particularly memorable. The use of location shooting and contributions by the citizens of Leon just one year after the fighting make this historical fiction a vivid recapturing of the experience of the insurrection.

If organizers are going to use this film effectively politically with an audience that has an understanding of sexual politics, then program notes or a spoken introduction must denounce the way the director attaches homosexual traits to the abusive villain, an army captain, who seeks to maintain control over the young male protagonist, his communications technician, both emotionally and through military force. The old cinematic tactic of representing decadence through images of "sexual derangement" characteristically abuses women and gays.

Because of its cinematic quality and its vivid visual imagery depicting provincial daily life in Central America, the film has a use in both film studies and foreign language classes. If one is studying the historical transformations of a genre, the use of melodrama to portray a

revolutionary movement is particularly interesting here, since the tensions between individual decision and collective needs and actions effect certain changes in the generic narrative form itself.

SANDINO VIVE (SANDINO LIVES)

(Dir. Maryknoll Order, U.S. 1980. 16mm, color, 28 min. Spanish or English versions. Free loan. Distributor: Modern Talking Pictures.)

Made within weeks after Somoza's fall, this film asks people — notable and ordinary — “What is Sandinismo?” Since it never moves beyond this generality, it is one of the weaker films made about the revolution.

SANDINO HOY Y SIEMPRE (SANDINO NOW AND FOREVER)

(Dir. Jan Kees de Rooy and Collective "Tercer Cine," Nicaragua, 1981. 16mm, color, 57 min. English subtitles. Distributor: Icarus.)

This film made by a European filmmaking collective based in Managua was destined for support work abroad. It gives a picture of the reconstruction process after the revolution. It delineates the organization and previous background of the male members of a small fanning cooperative in the north; it shows a young boy teaching literacy to a farm family. We see the Nicaraguan army hunting down Somoza terrorists who maraud across the Honduran border and then those terrorists in jail, where they are interviewed by the filmmakers. The film is most effective in depicting the mechanisms of and the people's commitment to collective action — in the popular militias, work collectives, and the governmental State Council. The film does not present in any detailed way the active participation of women in Nicaraguan society today.

The visual imagery is beautiful, and many of the sequences have a strong emotional impact, such as those depicting the boy's teaching the farmers literacy or the people's response to the murder of a literacy teacher by counterrevolutionaries. Music by Nicaraguan groups such as Carlos Mejía Godoy and Pancansan give a flavor of the popular arts.

THANK GOD AND THE REVOLUTION

(Dir. Jackie Reiter and Wolf Tirado, Collective "Tercer Cine," Nicaragua, 1981. 16mm, color, 50 min. Distributor: Icarus.) *

A widely used film with church groups, this documentary explores Christians' roles — as Christians — in defense and social reconstruction in revolutionary Nicaragua. It interviews progressive ministers, nuns, and priests who have been active in both social work and the armed struggle. It addresses the relation between the people's revolutionary ideology and their religious commitment. Included are interviews with priests who hold key government positions. Much emphasis is placed on the hierarchy and men's analyses, so that the role of religion in women's daily lives and their new revolutionary consciousness about religion is not gone into in depth.

FILMS ON NICARAGUA: THE FIGHTING

SCENES FROM THE REVOLUTION

(Dir. John Chapman, U.S. 1981. Originally shot in super-8. 16mm, color, 30 min. Distribution: Unifilm.)

This film, shot during the revolution from June 1979 through the first one hundred days of reconstruction, represents a triumph of the use of super-8 for reportage. Among the images is Dora Maria Tellez, seen in WOMEN IN ARMS, standing in front of a tank in combat gear explaining, "We don't have the concept of a boss man here. Each revolution will be seeing more and more women participating." Also included in the film is a comprehensive survey of Nicaraguan history.

Since many of the more recent films on Nicaragua do not illustrate the suffering and cost of the revolution, an earlier film like this that depicts the fighting — and also offers a good political analysis — is good to show alongside a film on reconstruction. In film studies and mass communications classes, the film is a must to demonstrate the uses of super-8 for documentary filmmaking.

NICARAGUA: SEPTEMBER 1978

(Dir. Frank Diamond, Netherlands, 1978. 16mm. color, 41 min. Spanish or English versions. Distributor: Unifilm.)

This film provided one of the first vehicles for doing support work for Nicaragua's revolutionary forces. Although dated, it still offers an excellent analysis of the background to the war — the economic, social, and political abuses of the Somoza regime. September 1978 marked the point at which the Nicaraguan people in five cities massively revolted and supported the guerrillas of the FSLN.

FREE HOMELAND OR DEATH (PATRIA LIBRE O MORIR)

(Dir. Antonio Yglesias and Victor Vega, Collective "Istmofilm," Costa Rica, 1978. 16mm, color, 75 min. Spanish with English subtitles. Distributor: Unifilm.)

Made with the cooperation of the FSLN during the war, this film depicts in detail the life in a guerrilla revolutionary camp in the mountains. It includes scenes of training, eating, and going to mass, with a discussion about Catholicism and revolution led by Fr. Ernesto Cardenal. A very effective presentation is given on Nicaraguan history, in the form of a slide show.

Because of its subtle manipulation of sound and image and its long, searching look at routines of camp life, this film provides one of the most cinematically interesting documentary portraits of the revolution — one that gains more interest as we become aware that the guerrilla camp is a way of life for many South American militants. The film concludes with battle sequences, and a repetition of the images of those participants who died during the making of the film.

FREE HOMELAND OR DEATH is of value for both Latin American Studies and film studies audiences. Its pacing and focus place it outside

tie realm of what I call the television documentary style. Aesthetically and in its connotative range, it speaks most powerfully to viewers acquainted with Latin American culture or to those interested in alternative forms for documentary film.

Notes

[1.](#) In his book, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), Erik Barnouw details how U.S. television networks actively collaborated with the government to present a sanitized view of what was happening in Vietnam. Many films about Vietnam were available from abroad, but the U.S. networks bought only fragments of footage from such films, a policy continued today with films made by Latin Americans.

[2.](#) For another description of these films, see Dennis West, "Revolution in Central America: A Survey of Recent Documentaries," *Cineaste*, 12:1 (1982).

[3.](#) See the whole issue of *Radical History Review* on "Presenting the Past: History and the Public," No. 25 (Oct. 1981). The U.S. television series on the Holocaust caused a furor in West Germany as it was seen by an extremely large number of viewers there. For information on the series' popularity and the controversy, see Jeffrey Herf, "The HOLOCAUST Reception in West Germany," *New German Critique*, No. 19 (1979-80).

4. For a detailed description of how the format of daily television news is itself ideological, see William Gibson, "Network News: Elements of a Theory," *Social Text*, 3 (Fall 1980).

[5.](#) CIA tactics of manipulating the media in Latin America to destabilize governments in Chile, Jamaica and Nicaragua have been documented and analyzed by Fred Landis, "CIA Media Operations in Chile, Jamaica, and Nicaragua," *Covert Action Information Bulletin*, No. 16 (December 1981), also published in *Science for the People* (Winter 1981-82). Landis is being sued for exposing the CIA's connection with the assassination of Chilean Ambassador Orlando Letelier and Ronnie Moffet (see his book, *Death in Washington*, co-authored with Donald Freed, Lawrence Hill and Co., 1981). He and his family are being harassed by the government, former CIA officials, and people making anonymous death threats.

[6.](#) Liisa North, *Bitter Grounds: Roots of Revolt in El Salvador*, Perspectives on Underdevelopment Series, Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 1981, p. 90. This is one of the best short texts to use in a course with these films or to sell at a literature table.

See also the long article by Robert Armstrong, "El Salvador: Beyond Elections," *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 16:2 (March-April 1982).

[7.](#) Frantz Fanon, "Concerning Violence," *The Wretched of the Earth*, Trans. Constance Farrington, New York: Grove Press, 1968.

[8.](#) Ibid., p. 43.

[9.](#) Margaret Randall, *Sandino's Daughters: Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle*, Ed. Lynda Yanz, Toronto: New Star Books, 1981.

[10.](#) Fanon, pp. 78-79.

[11.](#) For understanding the social role of the artist in Latin America, see the classic *The Modern Culture of Latin America: Society and the Artist* by Jean Franco (Baltimore: Penguin, 1970).

[12.](#) A vivid fictional portrait of sexual politics in Cuba was presented by director Sara Gomez in her feature-length fictional film, ONE WAY OR ANOTHER (distributed by Unifilm). For a discussion of the importance of that film within feminist and left art, see my essay, "Dialectical, Revolutionary, Feminist," JUMP CUT, No. 19 (December 1978).

DISTRIBUTORS

Americas in Transition, 401 W. Broadway, NYC 10012. 212/226-2465.

California Newsreel, 630 Natoma, San Francisco, CA 94103. 415/621-6196.

La Comision de Derechos Humanos de El Salvador, 3411 W. Diversey, Chicago, IL 60647. 312/384-7863.

Document Associates, Inc., 211 E. 43rd St., NYC 10017. 212/682-0730.

El Salvador Film and Video Projects, 799 Broadway, Room 235, NYC 10003.

Hudson River Productions, Po Box 515, Franklin Lakes, NJ 07417.

Icarus Films, 200 Park Ave. So., NYC 10016. 212/674-3375.

International Women's Film Project, 3518 35th St. NW, Washington, DC 20017. 202/996-0260.

Kino International, 250 N. 57th St., Room 314, NYC 10019. 212/586-8720.

Maryknoll Fathers, Brothers, and Sisters, Maryknoll, NY 10545.

Modern Talking Picture Service, 5000 Park St. No., St. Petersburg, FL 33709.

Lourdes Portillo, 989 Esmeralda, San Francisco, CA 94110.

Fred Barney Taylor and Kimberly Safford, 126 Chalmers St., NYC 10007. 212/227-1343.

Third World Newsreel, 160 Fifth Ave., Room 911, NYC 10010. 212/243-2310.

Unifilm, 419 Park Ave. So., NYC 10016. 212/689-9890.

World Focus Films, 2125 Ruffel St., Berkeley, CA 94705. 415/848-8126.

Free films and slide shows, along with speakers, are often available from local Nicaragua and El Salvador support groups. To get in contact with the group in your area, you can write the national headquarters of the following groups:

National Network in Solidarity with the Nicaraguan People, 1718 20th St. NW, 2nd Floor, Washington, DC 20009. 202/223-2328.

CISPES (Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador), PO Box 12056, Washington, DC 20005. 202/887-5019.

Comu-Nica (212/243-2678) has a number of Spanish language documentary films produced by INCINE, the Film Institute of Nicaragua. These films are described in a free bulletin from Nicaragua Communicates, P.O. Box 612, Cathedral Station, NYC 10025.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Interview with Christine Choy Third World Newsreel — ten years of left film

by Sherry Millner

from *Jump Cut*, no. 27, July 1982, pp. 21-22

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The following interview with Christine Choy of Third World Newsreel was done in two stages, first December 1978, and then January 1980. The discussions reflect on the early history of Third World Newsreel and offer an overview of the economic and political conditions of Newsreel's current practice. The interviews, first conducted by John Hess and Sherry Millner and second by Sherry Millner and Ernest Larsen, were transcribed and edited by Sherry Millner, and have been combined here for the sake of thematic cohesion. Third World Newsreel has the distinction of being the oldest independent political filmmaking organization in the country. Chris Choy's long-continued participation in Newsreel has equipped her with the necessary historical perspective to draw some needed and, in part, overdue conclusions about the state of contemporary U.S. political filmmaking.

Third World Newsreel makes and distributes political films. For more information, contact: Third World Newsreel, 160 Fifth Avenue, Suite 911, New York, NY 10010 (212/243-2310).

NEWSREEL HISTORY

Choy: In the early 70s Newsreel was making films like *THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY*, and *THE YOUNG LORDS*. The majority of Newsreel people felt they should work at recruiting more nonwhites into the organization. Two third world men began working with the organization and I, a Chinese woman, began about the same time. In 1972 we called a National Third World meeting of all Newsreels (we had national chapters up until about 1973). Five people came — four from New York and one from Boston. At that conference we five decided to struggle for films relating to third world people, made by third world people. We

could accomplish that by recruiting more third world people.

In New York, we started a Third World Caucus within the Newsreel chapter, recruiting twelve people. (No one got paid with the exception of the one person who worked in distribution for \$50.00 per week.) At this time, most people in Newsreel — called the White Caucus — were going through tremendous turmoil as they split into two groups — the haves and the have-nots, and everyone wanted to be a have-not instead of a have. The have-nots felt sympathy with the third world people's oppression. Six months later the haves all left Newsreel. The have-nots debated working-class issues; working class filmmaking; definitions of and strategies for cultural work, filmmaking, and organizing work. Many joined October League and the Revolutionary Union and women's groups. Newsreel began to change.

Meantime the Third World Caucus began to work on a film called TEACH YOUR CHILDREN. The white section was going through such chaos that they decided to dissolve themselves, leaving the organization with the twelve third world members but no money or equipment. We had a lot of films and debts but no catalogue. At the same time, among the minority members, people didn't know how to produce but everybody wanted to get paid. Internally we faced rip-offs and stealing.

Then, in 1973, we were evicted because we couldn't pay the rent, so we decided to move the organization. When only three people showed up to help move — Sue Robeson, Robert Zelner and myself — we moved the entire organization to Sixth Ave. and 23rd St. and told the rest of the people goodbye. Newsreel was left with three people.

I went away for about two weeks and came back to find that the organization had been robbed, with only one camera left. Some outside people took all the projectors and most other equipment. Fortunately, at that time Allan Siegal, an early Newsreel member, came around to help us reorganize, which sparked debate because he was white and we were operating with nationalist tendencies. But he came in; and we were able to raise the money for a down payment on another office on 20th Street.

When we began demanding training and skills from former members, only one or two were sincere enough to teach us how to use the camera. The rest wouldn't have anything to do with us. So it was out of anger that we called ourselves "Third World Newsreel." More and more as we define the term, we find it's not appropriate to our situation. The term Third World in the international sense is more applicable to an underdeveloped country. Domestically speaking, it applies to a national minority struggling for equality. When we use the term Third World, we use it superficially, since we distribute films from Latin America, Africa and Asia. But the production we do does not relate to Third World issues but to conditions in the United States, especially among minorities and working-class people as a whole. So the term has to be revised. But we haven't gotten around to it yet, and it's become an established trademark for our market.

JUMP CUT: Were you able to start making films right away, teaching each other skills?

Choy: We were mostly self-taught, which is reflected in our films. In our first film, TEACH YOUR CHILDREN, a film about Attica, we eliminated everything that had to do with whites. This film, made by two women all about men, contains only images of Blacks and Latinos. It represented our gut feelings about what had happened in that prison revolt. When first shown at UCLA, it had a tremendous impact because there was a struggle going on there around minority students' entering film school; and then it was shown in a black film festival. Later on we began concentrating on prison issues. We started making IN THE EVENT ANYONE DISAPPEARS, on men's prisons in New Jersey. And the following year, 1974, a New York Arts Council grant enabled us to start filming INSIDE WOMEN INSIDE.

With all the films about men's prisons, we thought one should deal with women in prison. We didn't even know how much film cost, so we applied for a \$4000 grant. Then, operating from an ultra-democratic approach, we called for a citywide meeting, where fifty women showed up to work on this film but could not agree. Everyone wanted to do the cinematography and direct, all with conflicting approaches and ideologies. From fifty the number fell to twelve, and from twelve to five. Then Sue Robeson left the organization, and I was left with the film. I believe that once a film is started, it should be finished — both for the people who worked on it and for those filmed. The film may not be perfect but it should be finished, because you cannot just take advantage of people.

When we recruited more minority women in 1974, problems arose because of a lack of class analysis and class definition in most of the women who started to work with us. They either came from a very petit bourgeois or lumpen background. The same thing applied to the women's movement in general, so the same contradictions would arise among the Newsreel women. Also I think sexism has always existed in our organization, so women have a hard time sticking through. Often in filmmaking a woman feels more comfortable working with other women. This problem was never worked out very well on the production teams. And then we began to realize we couldn't afford to train people on the job, because of the very little amount of money we got. In 1974 we received \$10,000 for three films: INSIDE WOMEN INSIDE, FRESH SEEDS IN THE BIG APPLE, and SPIKES TO SPINDLES. It was ridiculously low, but we've made them all.

On INSIDE WOMEN INSIDE, women were trained on the job, yet due to this fact, high shooting ratios increased our budget. Since our distribution could not yet support the production, it became a financial drain to the organization.

However, as an organization, when the money comes in, we decide collectively how to spend it. If we get \$10,000 for two films but cannot make two films for \$10,000, we decide collectively which film has

priority. Still, people with skills and techniques tend to dominate the discussion, especially about style and approach.

We try to make three films a year, one major film and two shorts. Or have one major film start production and maybe finish up other films that were started before, or do a compilation film or co-production. It's a difficult goal but we do it.

TELEVISION PRODUCTION

JUMP CUT: Did you stop training other people since you couldn't do on-production training?

Choy: A major aim is to train people on the job as much as possible. For the television film I did in Philadelphia, *LOOSE PAGES BOUND*, we took on three trainees. I would get very frustrated because I'd get deadlines and quality pressures very directly from the station. It's ironic. Within the traditional family, the man gets the pressure from the job and comes home and takes it out on the wife and children. Here I felt the same, being in a producer situation and responsible to the station. I would yell at other people, and often I'd be wrong or just didn't want to do it anymore. I hated myself for being in that kind of contradictory situation. Fortunately, we had a meeting every night, and were able to discuss the problems as they arose. Political filmmakers, minority filmmakers, and women filmmakers should have more work within the system so they are able to produce. It's very important for political filmmakers to be able to have some understanding about the network and get their films shown on television.

Through working with the system I've learned about myself and found I could now provide other people with information — about who to see, etc. — which makes it easier for other filmmakers to approach television. Of course, I had to go through a year and a half of battling with them before actual production started. You can get really sucked into the idea of working in television, but they don't care about quality, just a product. We artists have to find a way to combat our dependency. As the federal and state governments organize us, grants become the base for doing work, so the product comes before the politics. This recent tendency typifies the capitalist system. Art becomes a commodity, and the artist does too.

And the more money a filmmaker has, the more it dictates point of view. Last year when I worked on that film in Philadelphia for TV, which I got a lot of money for, I began to be more cautious because someone else was putting out the money. So I got more cautious about saying anything provocative.

JUMP CUT: Did you start to worry about your audience doing that film, wanting to reach more people?

Choy: Yes. Now I look at TV very differently. At first I looked at it romantically, thinking we could make a documentary for TV that could

be aesthetically and politically strong, and at the same time reach a mass audience. We also thought that after we produced it for TV, Newsreel could distribute it on a community level.

It didn't work out. First, the film was designed for commercial TV, so it was cut that way. Secondly, contractual time limitations affected the projects depth and left us with a shallow analysis. Since it is so desperately important to provide an analysis as a political filmmaker, we superficially injected one that didn't quite make it. Then, we thought that since it was a semi-political film, Newsreel should distribute it. Yet because of the money Third World Newsreel had to invest in prints, negatives, and promotions, we wound up losing money and not being able to distribute the film well.

JUMP CUT: Do you think it's possible theoretically to make a really good political film for TV, knowing what you do now?

Choy: If you go in as an independent producer for TV, you get a big chunk of money, including a big salary. Regardless of quality, you have to deliver. That's how payment comes: 50% to start up, 75% on the rough cut, and 100% on delivery. What we're doing is an experiment to see if we're able to work with TV or not. We did that show for ABC and people liked it. It was about Asian Americans in the Delaware Valley — five nationalities in 42 minutes. Every seven minutes there's a commercial break, so you cut for that. You end each section with a hype to keep people tuned in. Those are the requirements. If you have that kind of mentality you can do it, but I was not ready for it.

The censorship is tremendous. I needed to say something to tie the five nationalities together, so I had a song written by a political musician saying essentially that oppressed peoples are going to rise. This was towards the end of the film. They wanted me to cut that line out. There was a struggle about that. They said straight out it was too political. And prohibiting people's curse words immediately eliminates most people's vernacular.

Overall, they accepted the film and aired it. My personal feeling is that independent producing represents an opportunity to get into network TV without working up the ladder as a secretary, etc.. Yet you're still working within the system. And I was kidding myself about that. I was very romantic and idealistic.

What happens is the project itself becomes such a secondary issue. Within the system, first of all you write a proposal, get it accepted, get a budget, go into board meetings several times all dressed up — because they want to see what a producer-director looks like (I got myself a little blazer). And people say things they don't believe — that you're great, blah-blah — and there's a lot of backstabbing from other producers. All this affects your mentality. If I go in to do some xeroxing, a secretary says, "I'll do it for you." Wait a minute, I can do my own xeroxing! They offer you superficial status while they've got you by the neck.

Although there are a lot of good people working in television, they're not organized. The network hires me because non-union help is cheaper. It costs them \$60,000 for a 24-minute in-house film; I did it for \$25,000. That's why they hire independent producers. A context like this makes TV workplace organizing all the more necessary.

THE POLITICS OF FUNDING AGENCIES

Choy: For five years we got pretty good funding from NEA and New York State Council on the Arts. Then there were cuts, as they funded experimental films more. The funding agencies want to support social and political films that will make a big splash. When we went to a foundation for funding for our violence against women film, the first thing they asked was "Will it be on PBS?" More and more multinational corporations are investing money in documentaries for PBS programming. Visibility on the largest scale — through PBS or the U.S. film festivals — is all that matters. How the film, the product, gets circulated, how it really affects people, becomes secondary. That's what hurts. And a lot of filmmakers gear to that approach in order to get grants.

JUMP CUT: That's clear. A non-political PBS mentality has come to represent alternative cinema. It tends to make what you're doing here, for example, less visible and have less credibility.

Choy: I agree with you. It affects us a lot and is depressing. There are not enough outlets for showing independent films. Yet, if your films get shown at the Whitney's American Film Series, there's pretty good chance that you'll get a grant next cycle from AFI.

JUMP CUT: This process creates an Establishment for alternative filmmakers, which makes it very much harder for everybody else.

Choy: Nowadays fewer political films are being made. Partially, within the logic of the economic situation, people just write grants for \$50,000 to \$100,000 before they touch a camera. They want fame overnight, and they shoot for PBS.

JUMP CUT: There's a real loss of immediacy when the most important part of the filmmaking process is raising the money. Yet one can't be an idealist. We have to deal with material reality.

Choy: Yes, there are things you should do just for money, like some TV shows. There are films that should be produced for \$5,000, \$10,000. There are films that should be produced for \$50,000, and make a profit so you can make other films. But proposal writing takes time, and every foundation runs on different cycles. So you spend a whole year just writing proposals and circulating sample work. All of which perpetuates individual filmmakers' competitiveness. And people writing grant proposals become cautious about their political statements. At Newsreel our strategy is to get the distribution to sustain itself, to support our production. But it's very difficult.

Over the last year, on a financial level, in the state and federal government there's been an increasing centralization of funds. Fewer foundations and liberals are willing to invest money in film projects. There are also changes in the type of product the foundations want. Proposal writing has become a separate entity, rather than part of filmmaking itself. You really have to hire specialists to write proposals and to go to different foundations. Who do you know on a panel? What are their criteria? You basically gear the product to funders. As the country is going more and more toward the right, we feel it tremendously — both in terms of psyching out what they want and in terms of inflation.

What we used to be able to produce on a thousand dollars is not realistic anymore — even without paying a decent salary, even with equipment that you own, even with film stock you hustle to places other than Kodak, or with erasing old mag tape. It still costs \$10,000 to \$15,000 to produce 30 minutes of film. That's about two to three times what it used to be, but in line with the rate of inflation. It's very interesting to see the comparison between the film industry and the overall rate of inflation.

At the same time social films are becoming more legitimate, which means the institutionalization of women's issues, the institutionalization of racism, and the institutionalization of social change issues.

JUMP CUT: Which gives arts administrators a whole new field to start administering — cleaning films up, making them slick, and professional.

Choy: I think that has affected our whole organization. In terms of content we still manage to produce a certain level of politically oriented films. But in order to have marketability, in order to have sales, we have to be tremendously technically sophisticated. Also we have to gear into the demands of the TV market and to edit in a certain way to fit the market.

In our recent work, our style has changed. The cinematography is better, and we have a better sense of post-production work. Old Newsreel film used to be called workprint: you shoot it, cut it, and show it — basically as a workprint. Now, some of our films have ten tracks of sound. Much slicker work. But it works both ways. Most American audiences are conditioned to see slick films; sloppy films do bother them. Both aspects have their own values. The films that have the immediacy, the roughness, have a different type of emotional impact, and a different type of consciousness.

Films like *INSIDE WOMEN INSIDE* hit you very hard. However, films that are slicker are too comfortable to watch and content becomes secondary. The visual element is so pretty that the prettiness tends to dilute what we're really trying to say. Also from the filmmaker's viewpoint, if we have film that's really well shot and we edit it, we are more reluctant to throw any of it away.

JUMP CUT: Do you think that the establishment of the Film Fund is

going to change the politics of funding political cinema?

Choy: I don't know. They are supposed to do alternative-type of funding. But politics, culture and economy all have to be integrated. When I look at these foundations, I first look at the structure. My problem with the Film Fund's structure is that while they put progressive people on the board of directors, there's no mechanism for selecting the next board because there are no membership groups. The corporation's ownership still lies in two or three people's hands. Where can struggle take place? When I have made suggestions to them, they say, "Write a letter to the board of directors." But there is no room for the filmmakers and the board of directors to confront each other face-to-face. It doesn't need to be antagonistic, but it could be helpful to both sides.

Also, Film Fund is built around a revolving fund, meaning that after the filmmaker makes back the grant amount of \$10,000, the \$10,000 should go back to the Film Fund. That's great. But when it goes back, who decides how that money is going to be used? Not the people who actually made the money back by putting their thought and energy into the film. For instance, one year the Film Fund criterion may be to fund a film on black history. Black history gets \$10,000 back and it goes back to Film Fund. Then, if Film Fund decides that population control is the priority, the people who worked on the black history film do not have a voice, nor a mechanism for any kind of struggle to take place.

JUMP CUT: So each filmmaker faces the Film Fund as an individual?

Choy: Right, they want to deal only with individuals. In effect, they are disorganizing those who have already organized. When they've told me, "Well, we only want to deal with individual producers," I found this no different from the way television stations treated us. And I could struggle with television stations on this issue in a way that I could not with the Film Fund (1978). Personally, I think they have played a divisive role within the film community and in particular within Newsreel. They should respect organizations' needs, too.

The Film Fund's rationale is that an individual's success contributes to their ability to raise money. We have the same problem. But by making that their only priority, and not respecting organizations' needs, the Film Fund can become very mechanistic.

NEWSREEL'S ORGANIZATION

JUMP CUT: What is the present structure of Newsreel?

Choy: We decided we had to have a division of labor to function: distribution, production, and theater. In production, we train in techniques and filmmaking theory. A small core of staff members works day-to-day and makes a commitment to Newsreel. We used to demand of Newsreel members a lifetime commitment, so many people left, instead of working with people on the basis of whatever they could contribute. Now we have a larger body considered part of the Newsreel

network, who work only on specific projects and share in the organization's benefits.

Originally, maybe ten or twenty people would produce a Newsreel film, but nobody got a credit. This eliminated a hierarchical system between producer, director, and editor. But ten years later people felt resentful about the lack of credits.

JUMP CUT: But that's something created by material conditions. We all have to go get jobs.

Choy: And you have to have track records.

JUMP CUT: At that time, we didn't think we'd have to go out and operate in those same old ways.

Choy: We thought that would change. Resentment developed against the organization, and because a lot of people here are new, it's hard to remember who worked on what films. Our solution is that whoever has been part of Newsreel can get prints at lab cost and splice in their own credits. Now, as you say, ten years later in the film world, it's the individual that counts — the name, the track record, the whole star-building syndrome.

JUMP CUT: If you want to make films and you want to be able to finance them and have some credibility, you can't struggle on every front, so you put individual credits on the films. Now, ten years later, we understand the work it takes to keep going, making films that people will understand, finding a style that people will be receptive to. But Newsreel has survived.

Choy: Well, that's the miracle. There've been many transitions, so many new people. Sometimes all the checks bounced, and the IRS pressured us. We survived, I think, because we have political unity. People here still believe in making films independently from the system. They still have idealism, which keeps the organization moving. Second, Newsreel does provide an opportunity for people who really want to make films, because its organizational structure can offer more stability than independent individual filmmakers often have.

JUMP CUT: Last year you were teaching a film skills class to community people. Are you still?

Choy: Yes, but we've been changing our strategy. What do you teach people for? Originally we wanted to raise people's political consciousness in looking at films, and we considered politics more important than actual filmmaking. Therefore we used textbooks by John Howard Lawson or Herbert Schiller's *The Mind Managers* to look at the overall scope of the film industry and media in general. But the individual comes here wanting to learn camera, editing, directing — period. This runs counter to our internal organizational understanding. At first we held big beginners classes. Then we went to intermediate.

Now in Spring 1981, we're using more project-oriented classes divided into groups, five in each, which would actually produce a film from beginning to end.

JUMP CUT: You want to be a stable organization that a lot of people can connect to and put their energy into. But you can't always do that. It's not realistic financially, or for the needs of the organization. You wind up being a social service agency — a political social service agency.

Choy: The only way an organization works is through the individuals themselves within the organization, who must have some kind of understanding of their needs from the organization. Everybody felt they were serving the organization, but what they were getting out of the organization was never even questioned. That became a large contradiction. We've talked about possible solutions to the lack of money.

Take myself, for instance, I have skills and can go out and get a job. Is that the way to solve the problem? Getting a job to support yourself. Then the organization doesn't have to pay anybody's salary. Another way is to bring jobs into the organization. That's what we've been doing recently. Before we were saying, "You go out and get a part-time job to make money." But that alienated people much more. We've gotten CETA jobs here, so we did not have to rely on grants. We still write proposals, but it's not a primary thing.

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Politics and style in *Black Girl*

by Marsha Landy

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“History teaches us that, in certain circumstances, it is very easy for the foreigner to impose his domination on a people. But it also teaches us that, whatever may be the material aspects of this domination, it can be maintained only by the permanent organized repression of the cultural life of the people concerned.”

— Amílcar Cabral, *Return to the Source* [\(1\)](#)

Knowledge of film history and theory is incomplete without dealing with Third World cinema. Third World filmmakers understand the pitfalls of uncritical or programmatic uses of film form and language, incapable of challenging and interesting audiences. They have experimented with creating films which will engage audiences with their politics and art. In addition, the films will provide the basis for new forms of cultural expression to supplant the European culture imposed by colonial domination. As Western audiences see more works of African filmmakers, it becomes evident that we can learn much about the ways in which political films can be vehicles of investigation, enlightenment, and pleasure, rather than of indoctrination and escapism. The African films act in a manner similar to Sartre's description of Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*. In the process of explaining the Westerner to the African, they also explain their structural "mechanisms whereby we Westerners are estranged from ourselves." [\(2\)](#) For us, the films provide alien, challenging images of the relations between colonizer and colonized, exposing the subtle forms and consequences of domination. Ultimately the analysis is not as alien to the Western viewer as it might first seem.

BLACK GIRL (1966), Sembene Ousmane's first feature film, self-consciously explores the nature and effects of cultural domination. It also demonstrates how film itself can be shaped as an instrument in the struggle for cultural liberation. BLACK GIRL provides an introduction to political and stylistic concerns in later Sembene films such as MANDABI (1969), EMITAI (1972), XALA (1974) and CEDDO (1977). On its own merits, it provides a basic text for identifying what Sembene has

called the “engaged” cinema.

Sembene's political sympathies lie with the African workers. He has over a lifetime used his intellect and cinematic skills to expose the ways that the white bourgeoisie and their counterparts, the African bourgeoisie, oppress the African workers. He has explored the subordination of woman, a theme central to *BLACK GIRL* as well as to his other films and literary work. He portrays the oppression of women by the residual traditional tribal and Islamic cultures, which act to restrain women from moving into the modern world. These indigenous cultural formations condemn women to take menial and domestic work because of their lack of training, education, and social immobility. The economic and ideological structures of neocolonialism and commodity capitalism are, according to Sembene, the newest historical expression of capitalist and imperialist domination over the masses of African men and women. Like other African filmmakers, Sembene regards his films as a means of combating European hegemony. The films educate people to existing conditions while charting new political and cultural alternatives.

Though the political concerns outlined above are evident in the content of *BLACK GIRL*, they are also realized in the very structure and language of the film. Sembene is acutely conscious of the role of language as a major instrument for raising political consciousness. The importance of language is emphasized in both the content and style of his work. Realizing as a writer that the audiences he wants to reach are often illiterate, Sembene has turned to the cinema for its more popular accessibility that is not dependent upon literacy.

In opting for a medium that is less dependent upon literacy to be understood, Sembene has by no means abandoned the desire to educate his audiences and to represent their conditions and needs. His Senegalese audiences are not unfamiliar with film. Yet those films to which they are primarily exposed, American and European, hardly provide an insight into the African world. For these reasons, Sembene has experimented with narrative strategies to develop the viewer's awareness of the film as film. In spite of the simple and forthright "story" in *BLACK GIRL*, the narrative forms are complex, though not mystifying, inviting the audience to engage with the deeper questions posed. Among the diverse stylistic tactics Sembene employs are the following: self-reflexivity, satire, irony, and experimentation with cinematic structural components, such as montage. He blends traditional African "storytelling" devices with experimental film language. He fuses a form of neorealism with a critique of the "real." His goal in all this is to forge active and exciting links between his films and Senegalese audiences.

BLACK GIRL records the story of a young black Senegalese woman, Diouana, brought to Antibes by a French couple previously stationed in Dakar. Under the mistaken assumption that she has been employed as a governess for the couple's children, Diouana quickly learns that she must do the cooking, laundry, cleaning, and babysitting. Without salary

or friends, treated as invisible by her employers, confined to the house except for shopping, and disillusioned by the sad discrepancy between the realities of her life in France and her earlier fantasies of France as a Mecca of beautiful people, appealing consumer items, and adventure, Diouana finally commits suicide.

Clearly, Sembene has elected to concentrate attention on one character exclusively. Through an obvious and seemingly banal plot, he seems to want to provoke the viewer through a commonplace character, challenging the audience to confront why the story of a simple, inarticulate female domestic might be deserving of attention. Correspondingly, the simple and economical manner in which he presents the events provokes questions about motive and meaning.

BLACK GIRL begins by showing a ship moving through the water, the ship docking, and dockworkers unloading the ship. We see white people on deck, and then we focus on a black woman in Western clothes, carrying a suitcase. A white man gets out of a car, takes Diouana's baggage, saying simply, "You made it," or "Let's go." No greetings are exchanged. Diouana gets in the car; a perfunctory conversation ensues. The remainder of the ride is in silence. The camera from within captures the landscape without: the beach, the road, the sign, "Antibes," and finally the street sign, "Chemin d'Ermitage."

After a brief shot of the apartment house, we observe the arrival of the man and the woman in the apartment, focusing only on the emotionless encounter between the white woman and Diouana, and the woman's equally emotionless greeting of the husband. The woman takes Diouana into a bedroom, shows her the bed, takes her to the window where the Frenchwoman reels off the names of places on the Riviera, then takes her to the kitchen. In an abrupt transition, we see Diouana cleaning the tub, then the mirror. Only diverted by a brief scene of her in her room, making her bed, putting on her shoes and her jewelry, we return, by means of a wipe (and Sembene uses wipes several times to indicate quietly the passage of time, the flowing of the domestic activities into each other) to Diouana at work again, in the kitchen. For the first time, by means of a voice-over monologue, we are given Diouana's perspective on her situation, her confusion at being confined to the kitchen and her bedroom, her disappointment at having to work as a domestic. Repeatedly she asks, "Why am I here?"

These sequences are puzzling. The audience seems to be placed outside the interactions, only gradually admitted to what is happening. While the film, in reproducing the ordinary and unexceptional, seems close to neorealism, its context is too flat and spare. It rejects techniques for producing identification and sympathy. Instead, the minimal visual imagery and dialogue in BLACK GIRL generates questions: Who is Diouana? Why is she here? Where does she come from? What is her relation to the white woman and man?

Yet the viewer gains information from observing Diouana. She is black, a woman alone, confronted by indifferent whites, and unable to

communicate — in a way that goes beyond the problem of speaking French. Moreover, the film's visual and verbal silences reinforce Diouana's own silence, seemingly giving us the servant's perspective rather than the filmmaker's, who might be tempted to speak more directly for her. In many ways, *BLACK GIRL* reflects Sembene autobiographically. For example, himself transplanted from Dakar to France, Sembene was a dockworker in France and forced to contend with the racial and cultural situation which he has Diouana experience. Not as highly stylized, ritualistic, or satirical as later films such as *CEDDO* and *XALA*, *BLACK GIRL* can be read as Sembene's exorcizing his rage at cultural obliteration.

The film progressively delineates the particular dimensions of Diouana's subordinate position. At a luncheon where Diouana cooked African food, the guests talk about Senegal but not to her. Her objectification both as a woman and as African is further dramatized when a male guest asks to kiss her, saying that he has never kissed a black woman before. Diouana is offended. But no one reproaches him, though the hostess comes into the kitchen and offhandedly "apologizes" by minimizing the act. At coffee, a guest and the wife discuss Diouana's mastery of French. Seemingly she understands it "instinctively ... like an animal." Diouana's inability to speak for herself is, in Sembene's terms, the crux of her cultural subordination. It's the mark of French dominance over the African.

How can we account for Diouana's willingness to come to France under such conditions? Flashback sequences relate Diouana's recent history and trace her situation to economic and class factors. In a voice over, she articulates the classical storyteller's formula: It all began that morning in Dakar. The camera tracks Diouana's journey over the bridge that connects the poor African section of Dakar to the more prosperous area where she searches for woman's work, going from door to door, only to have them slammed in her face. As an African woman, her economic impotence is ironically worse than that of some well-dressed black men she passes. They reveal by their conversation and appearance that they are members of the French-speaking, French-dominated African bourgeoisie, frustrated at their political powerlessness as elected officials.

At a village square, she finds other women sitting and waiting for a potential employer. We witness the arrival of Diouana's future employer. Several times she passes in review of the women, peering over her dark glasses and leisurely regarding each of them as if they were slaves on a block before she makes her selection. In their eagerness, the women rush at the European woman while, in her inexperience, Diouana hangs back. By contrasting Diouana's reticence with the others' over-eagerness, Sembene establishes that the white woman selects Diouana as a rebuke to the other women's obvious financial desperation. The brevity of the scene, its minimal action and dialogue, and its unalleviated contrast between dominant and subordinate classes, brings into focus the situation of many black women in Dakar. They face a total

dependence on the white elites for work, the scarcity of employment, and the degrading process of seeking work. Diouana's joy at getting the position underscores her naiveté.

This "naiveté" is further developed by means of an important image in the film, the African mask, which Diouana takes from a young boy, possibly her brother, to give as a gift to her employer. On her arrival, she hands the mask over to her mistress. The camera moves to reveal two other African masks hanging on the wall. The couple, after examining the mask, does not comment on the generosity of the gift or ask about its meaning for Africans. Nor could Diouana tell them. The husband comments, "It could be the real thing," as if it were an investment. The mask seems to signify the African culture appropriated and exploited by the French and rendered inert. Does Diouana's offering it to her employers symbolize for Africans willing, though unaware, collaboration with the European?

The history of Diouana's self-deception and gradual awakening can be read visually in her relationship to "things," in her abandonment of the mask and in her attachment to her wigs, shoes, jewelry and dresses. These consumer objects at first indicate Diouana's false expectations about going to France. Later she uses them to defend her selfhood against her employers' treatment of her as invisible or insubordinate. Finally, these objects seem fetishes that need to be destroyed. That is, these deceptive, appealing images of the power of consumer objects signify the complex obstacles that bind young Africans like Diouana to imperialism.

The film's depiction of the French couple seems calculated to counteract those French magazines and films to which Diouana is exposed, if not addicted. Sembene presents the couple in negative fashion, as if attempting point for point to destroy any attractiveness Africans might find in their style of life. They overeat, drink too much, and fight. Through image rather than dialogue, Sembene exposes their interpersonal relations, an alienation deriving from both indifference and hostility. The man drinks, even during the day, and sleeps. While he and Diouana are alone in the house, the camera focuses on him sprawled on his bed like a dead man, perhaps an ironic comment on the master's "potency." The exploiters' lives are aimless and joyless. "Is this living?" Diouana asks herself as she begins to define France as a kitchen, a black hole, and herself as alone and a prisoner.

There is a strategy of exorcism underlying the film. Sembene constructs the couple as composite figures or types rather than individuals, situating their roles within the film's allegory. They represent attitudes to be rejected. As the film depicts their behavior, it is full of innuendo and understatement. Sembene abstracts and attributes to them those qualities characteristic of bourgeois life in the domestic sphere. By situating Diouana here as an "invisible" domestic, Sembene provides a perspective on the European bourgeoisie. By creating flat characters, Sembene seems to be seeking to avoid melodramatic villainy, which

could too easily be dismissed as exaggerated. Notwithstanding, Sembene is not unsympathetic to the couple's own dilemma. The wife, a contradictory figure, is herself oppressed. As a woman in an unpleasant domestic situation she oppresses another woman. Treated as an invisible presence by her husband, she, in turn, negates Diouana's presence, and has no recognition or empathy with Diouana's distaste for menial domestic work. Occasionally the bourgeoisie woman is capable of a fleeting recognition of Diouana's discomfort, but the Frenchwoman dismisses or minimizes it, much as she refuses to confront her own subordinate situation.

Diouana's subordination expresses itself especially in terms of language. The role and importance of language surfaces fully in the sequence where Diouana receives a letter from Dakar, presumably from her mother. The husband, not his wife, reads the letter, which Diouana cannot read. Without asking Diouana's permission, he begins to write a response since Diouana cannot write. Like the male scribe in Diouana's community, this man will speak for her. The master's control over her communication expresses Diouana's subjection. Her inability to read and write confronts her starkly. Isolated from home, unable to communicate messages about her imprisonment to the people at home, and humiliated by her employer's appropriation of her reality, she insists in a reflection conveyed by voice over that the letter is not her mother's letter and that the letter the husband is writing for her is not her own letter, thus stressing that neither she nor her mother speak for themselves. She refuses to cooperate, and the mistress says, "She's mad."

Throughout the film, Sembene has emphasized Diouana's isolation. He uses voice over to depict that cultural and personal isolation. To examine the link between language and power is to expose patterns of cultural domination. Yet Sembene's use of Diouana as the narrative instrument to expose cultural imperialism speaks primarily to Sembene's economic and cultural concerns rather than to his concern for the subordination of women. Though sensitive to the oppression of women, here Sembene has only brushed the surface of patriarchal attitudes.

The letter-writing sequence establishes how much self-consciousness Diouana has of her situation. By merging the language theme with images of interiority and exteriority, Sembene provides the prologue to Diouana's suicide. Diouana's movements have become increasingly circumscribed: a long boat trip, a car ride, and then confinement to domestic service in the apartment. Seeing her outside in the flashback sequences in Dakar only heightens our sense of her imprisonment. Eventually she will retreat into her room, then into herself, as the external world ceases to exist for her.

By means of a second flashback, Sembene attempts to situate Diouana's domestic servitude within a larger historical context by linking it to the sacrifices of African soldiers in the service of the colonial power.

Diouana spent a happy day with a young man she had met while job-hunting and was then unwilling to listen to his warnings about France. She climbs on a monument commemorating the Senegalese who died in the service of the French in WW2. Not only does Sembene here prefigure Diouana's death, but the irony of her going to France to serve the former colonial power is obvious. The image of her dancing on the monument, oblivious to its meaning, establishes for the viewer the specific import of her "remembering" this episode in France. Then she comes to terms with her earlier refusal to understand the nature and meaning of her servitude and its roots in Senegalese history.

This flashback provides the context for her confrontation with her employers. Significantly, the struggle takes place over the mask. Having reappropriated the mask, Diouana is unwilling to relinquish it to the wife, who fights with Diouana to possess it. The husband separates them, acknowledging that the mask is Diouana's. Alone in her room, Diouana articulates her rage and defiance:

"Never again will the mistress scold me, force me to remove my shoes, tell me I am lazy."

In her anger, which leads to her suicide, she expresses the slave's classic and ultimate form of resistance to the master, the refusal to serve. Diouana's suicide has multiple significance. It is a reproach to her masters, who exploit her and do not even recognize their exploitative practices. It is also as the inevitable conclusion to her sense of total isolation and imprisonment. Her death has wider allegorical and didactic ramifications. Her refusal to continue in a condition of servitude is representative of the necessary refusal of other Africans, equally uneducated and imbued with false illusions, to identify with the white oppressor. Her death symbolizes the desired destruction of this old way of life as Sembene diagnoses it.

Sembene has identified Diouana's lusting after European culture as suicidal. In 1966, he is using her as a symbol to reveal and exorcise the false expectations of young Africans as they meet European culture. Vulnerability to European culture, as Fanon has also shown, afflicts young people in underdeveloped cultures:

"In an African country, where mental development is uneven, where the violent collision of two worlds has considerably shaken old traditions and thrown the universe of the perceptions out of focus, the impressionability and sensibility of the young Africans are at the mercy of the various assaults made upon them by the very nature of Western culture."⁽³⁾

BLACK GIRL is Sembene's attempt to dramatize these results.

The suicide at the end of BLACK GIRL raises a problem common to many neo-realist films. Namely, the death of the protagonist has implications of determinism. Neorealism poses a contradiction when it

portrays oppression as the outgrowth of changing social conditions, while dramatizing individuals as immobilized and destroyed. Moreover, the narrative structures do not allow for alternatives, except perhaps mechanically. Also, in neorealist presentations, death can function as a rhetorical device to enlist the audience's sympathy often at the expense of analysis, offering catharsis rather than resistance. In his later films, Sembene adopts new strategies for depicting the oppressed. In his development of character, image, and theme, he orchestrates contrasts and alternatives more fully. And through foregrounding conflict rather than submission, he transforms his victims to active protagonists.

Sembene does attempt in *BLACK GIRL* to transform Diouana's suicide and use it to develop a new sense of class solidarity. After Diouana's death, shots present a brief newspaper clipping announcing that a black girl from Dakar has slit her throat; the tub, clean now, where she committed the act; and her suitcase repacked by her employers. By means of a repetition of images and gestures, Sembene moves us back to Dakar as to alter, if not reverse, the earlier events. Diouana's master returns over the same bridge, as he comes in penance with the suitcase and mask to Diouana's home. The public letter-writer seen earlier guides him to the black section. The young boy reclaims the mask; the mother refuses money and turns away. Isolated now and bewildered, the man leaves, but his movements are followed by the stares of the black men. They stare, not vacantly, but as if their faces are masks, their looks contemptuous and vengeful. In the last sequence the young boy, wearing the African mask, pursues the white man against the man's efforts to get away. The sound is of drums and African music. In this image, Sembene shows the conflict of black and white, Frenchmen and African, bourgeois and "indigene," old and young, colonizer and colonized at the point of confrontation.

This final image subsumes all the film's other images and events. The boy's appropriation of the mask, wearing it as he pursues the man, and finally removing it to permit us to see his face, develops more fully the meaning of the mask, and hence the film's final didactic movement. Though we see the mask, we also see the boy's face fully. The final image of the film is double, the mask and the boy's face. Sembene thus suggests how a new culture can emerge based on recognition of the past. As the film dramatizes through Diouana the consequences of repressing "the cultural life of the colonized people," so these last sequences suggest what Amilcar Cabral describes as

“a reconversion of minds — of mental set ... indispensable to the true integration of people into the liberation movement.”

The editing ties together the boy and the mask with the faces of the other Africans, who pursue the white man with their looks, thus stressing the collective struggle. Links are forged between the onlookers within the film and the film audience. In this manner, the film suggests that the resolution of the class and cultural conflict is not the property of a single individual but rather of the collective will of the African

"audience" As BLACK GIRL grows out of a basis of common social needs so Sembene suggests, the solution must be found in collective social action.

Sembene understands, in all his works, that to face modern social conflict women's position in society must be transformed. Yet there are problems with Sembene's presentation of women and particularly with his portrait of Diouana. Sembene's foregrounding of economic and cultural conflict takes precedence over the conflicts deriving from sexual oppression. This political position has consequences for the ways in which his novels and films regard or disregard women's subordination. That Sembene frequently uses women as symbols or archetypes indicates that for all of his centering of women, he uses them as metaphors for other struggles. Furthermore, he has not plumbed the more subtle ways women are objectified through language.

By making Diouana a symbol for the African working class and using her as an intermediary, he repeats a common practice in fiction of designating women as the carriers of general cultural values, values which do not necessarily speak at all to women's own needs and problems. Moreover, by killing off Diouana, a practice Sembene avoids with women characters in later films, Sembene invokes the common image of woman as sacrificer, one who tends and bears life for others often at the expense of her own. Here Diouana's "sacrifice" awakens and bonds the community for its own survival. Finally, a boy in BLACK GIRL carries the message of political resistance. This last image reinforces Sembene's distinction between women as symbols of potential and the men as realizers of that potential. The young man who had attempted to warn Diouana was also actively involved in political struggle, as evidenced by the liberation banner in his room and his grasp of political realities, which is not at all the case with Diouana, the central female character.

Sembene's main formal and political concerns have been worked out in his experiment with narration. Being African involves for Sembene, as it must for all formerly colonized people, an inevitable conjunction of the European and indigenous cultures. Yet increasingly, after BLACK GIRL, which shows the stamp of Italian neo-realism, Sembene's films have become more African, even to the extent of being produced in the national language, Wolof, rather than French. Specifically, Sembene's mode of narration seems to have its roots in the African oral tradition of storytelling, though his uses of the tale are modified by modern narrative techniques. According to Walter Benjamin, the tale reflects an older, traditional, and collectivist world, whereas the modern narrative is an inevitable expression of industrial society, reflecting alienation and an individualistic outlook on the world.⁽⁴⁾ Sembene's narration reveals an awareness of these differences, and an attempt to address them on the level of narration.

The storyteller has a didactic role, providing counsel for the audience by telling a basic, practical tale involving a person seeking to find his or her

"way about the world." Death as a proof or sanction within the tale reinforces the teller's counsel. The events in the tale come out of history, that history unfolding in the simple, direct events recounted. (5) The tale itself is a record of events, both narrator and audience sharing a vital interest in retaining what is told. Mnemonic devices form part of the narrative apparatus. By means of similarities, oppositions, incremental repetition, and the use of typical modes of representation, the narrator seeks to reinforce memory. Sembene uses the suitcase, the mask, Diouana's clothing, the parallel events at beginning and end, the repetition of certain questions such as, "Why am I here?", and the stark contrasts between Africa and France, black and white, bourgeois and worker, to assist the audience in differentiating situations and in remembering. Moreover, Sembene's avoidance of complex psychological analysis keeps the people and events grounded within the *social* conflict.

As Sembene uses narration, it is not solely the outgrowth of tradition, but a self-conscious exploration of storytelling as a factor in creating future political consciousness. Sembene expresses the African's need to draw from the past what is useful to the present. Again, on the level of form, Sembene seems to be echoing Frantz Fanon, who finds that in the storytelling process,

"The existence of a new type of man [sic] is revealed to the public. The present is no longer turned in upon itself but spread out for all to see. The storyteller once more gives rein to his imagination ... It even happens that the characters ... are taken up and remodeled ... The storyteller replies to the expectant people by successive approximations ... toward the seeking out of new patterns, that is to say national patterns." (6)

Sembene transforms traditional storytelling by grafting on to the tale certain modern narrative techniques. Concerned as he is with going beyond mere description of the painful events, and equally beyond a simple sentimental or moral response to the situations, he introduces devices which inhibit simple identification. For example, in the voice-over monologues of Diouana as she moves from confusion over her role, to clarification, to rage, and finally to resistance, Sembene takes us into her internal conflicts to show us the introjected patterns of servitude and her rejection of these patterns. Sembene's treatment of time moves serially, as it does in a tale's movement. It also goes beyond to include subjective states in monologues and in exploring Diouana's "history" through flashbacks. Time in the film moves forward. However, in his attempt to show sameness as well as differences, through his use of wipes, fades, dissolves, and cuts, Sembene allows us to see both the repetition of basic acts which could reflect the passage of days, years, or decades, and the actual changes which are taking place. We are thus permitted to experience Diouana's imprisonment in time and in her mind, while also experiencing the way out.

In "The Responsibility of the Artist," Aimé Césaire asserts,

"The colonial regime is the negation of action: negation of creation. There is an implicit hierarchy between *creators* and *consumers*." [\(7\)](#)

[The role of intellectuals is] "to hasten decolonization, and in the very heart of the present, to make ready for good decolonization ... in whatever way possible ... hasten the maturation of popular self-awareness." [\(8\)](#)

For Césaire, as for Sembène, art is political.

Sembène's use of the African mask serves a reflexive function in the film. The mask is an artifact which expresses African culture and history. The film stands in relation to the historical and cultural present as the mask stood to the past. A contemporary artifact incorporates into its history this earlier cultural expression, bringing it into the present to reflect contemporary needs. [\(9\)](#) As the mask was functional, so Sembène attempts to make his film functional for his contemporary audience in behalf of political and cultural changes. Thus, the film's title derives from a newspaper article, which lets Sembène contrast journalism's cryptic, bureaucratic, and dispassionate language to film's story. The film humanizes, enlarges, and challenges the audience to engage in the problems presented. The "news" reveals yet again the French's indifference to the African's condition. Sembène's "retelling" of the black girl's history is thus not cast in a passive mode of documenting, objectifying, and forgetting. It serves to remind us of the historical, functional, and political dimensions of narration.

Notes

[1.](#) *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches by Amílcar Cabral*. Edited by Africa Information Service (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), p. 39.

[2.](#) Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth: A Negro Psychoanalyst's Study of the Problems of Racism and Colonialism in the World Today*. Preface by Jean-Paul Sartre. (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1966), p. 12.

[3.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 156.

[4.](#) Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 86.

[5.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 94.

[6.](#) *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 194.

[7.](#) Wilfred Cartney and Martin Kelson. *The Africa Reader: Independent Africa*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), p. 155.

[8.](#) *Ibid.* p. 154.

[9.](#) Sembène has said, "The works of yesterday, masks, statues, all the

symbolism of the life of the audience ... remain in the minds of the people and in their daily activities." "Man Is Culture," Sixth Annual Hans Wolff Lecture, March 5, 1975, Bloomington, Indiana: African Studies Program.

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Three faces of Africa Women in *Xala*

by Françoise Pfaff

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XALA (1975), one of the latest and most successful films by the Senegalese writer and filmmaker Ousmane Sembene, is a parable. In it metaphors are closely interwoven with the reality they reflect. This film takes place among Black Africa's growing middle class, which is doomed to lose its power unless it stops aping the Western world and identifies with the needs and social aspirations of the African masses.

The male protagonist of XALA is El Hadji Abdoukader Beye, a successful middle-aged polygamous businessman. At the beginning of the plot, he prepares to take a third wife, a desirable young woman. This wedding is celebrated in a highly festive and ostentatious manner. Joining his young wife during the course of their wedding night, he is unable to perform his sexual duties. El Hadji realizes that he has become impotent. He believes that a spell has been cast upon him and goes to consult with various witch doctors. El Hadji's previous social prestige was, along with other status symbols, linked to his ability to show his manhood by satisfying two wives sexually and economically.

Now, his sexual impotence parallels his business bankruptcy. Impoverished and accused of embezzlement, he is ejected from the Chamber of Commerce and most of his luxurious possessions are confiscated. Finally, El Hadji discovers that the spell of impotency has been put on him by one of the beggars of Dakar whom he had cheated years ago when he appropriated the beggar's land. The beggar promises El Hadji the recovery of his manhood if he will strip and be spat upon by the beggar and his friends. The businessman feels he has no other choice but to surrender to the beggar's request in the hope of regaining his virility.

El Hadji's wealth is fragile. It is that of the national bourgeoisie, whose apparent power relies on its ability to trade with former colonial "metropolises," the dictates of which he has to endure. Frantz Fanon, the well-known Martiniquan political writer, contemptuously acknowledges

the shallowness of such a bourgeoisie by saying:

“From the beginning the national bourgeoisie directs its efforts toward activities of the intermediary type. The basis of its strength is found in its aptitude for trade and small business enterprises, and in securing commissions. It is not its money that works, but its business acumen. It does not go in for investments and it cannot achieve that accumulation of capital necessary to the birth and blossoming of an authentic bourgeoisie.” [\(1\)](#)

Fanon readily stresses the precarious status of such a class by saying:

“The national middle class which takes over power at the end of the colonial regime is an underdeveloped middle class. It has practically no economic power, and in any case it is in no way commensurate with the bourgeoisie of the mother country which it hopes to replace.” [\(2\)](#)

Thus, this national middle class hides its lack of economic power under the cloak of luxury. According to Frantz Fanon:

“Since the bourgeoisie has not the economic means to ensure its domination and to throw a few crumbs to the rest of the country; since, moreover, it is preoccupied with filling its pockets as rapidly as possible but also as prosaically as possible, the country sinks all the more deeply into stagnation. And in order to hide this stagnation and to mark this regression, to reassure itself and to give itself something to boast about, the bourgeoisie can find nothing better to do than to erect grandiose buildings in the capital and to lay out the money on what are called prestige expenses.” [\(3\)](#)

The very first sequences of *XALA* indicate that El Hadji personifies the ideological, political and social concerns of Senegal's mercantile elite fifteen years after independence. In Sembene's mind, El Hadji's impotence (or "xala" in Wolof) reflects as well that of the Senegalese nation. The filmmaker sees the country culturally, politically, and socially emasculated by its colonial inheritance and present dependence. *XALA*'s biting and sarcastic mood is conveyed through the fascinating close ups of faces and situations in a succession of carefully planned sequences, all of which constitute a beautiful visual study on protocols and crosscurrents of an emerging African middle class. Sembene's film focuses on the betrayal of a country by its rulers and a man by his own body.

The title as well as the content of Sembene's film places emphasis on male genitality. In literature as in film (both are social reflectors), it has often been observed that women characters have been defined by the men with whom they relate. *XALA*, at first sight, seems to support such a broad statement. Yet a more in-depth analysis of this film reveals that the women characters in *XALA* are more than appendices to El Hadji. It

is through the women that his power is shown and in turn negated. As such, they are an intrinsic part of his social ascent and subsequent decline. The female characters' function is so important, on both a socio-realistic and symbolic level, that they can be viewed as integral characters. Their structural and ideological facets not only mirror but also are equal in importance to that of the male protagonist.

Awa, El Hadji's oldest wife, appears as the embodiment of African traditions even if her environment is no longer purely traditional. She lives in a house located in an affluent Dakar neighborhood with her own children and servants. Like El Hadji she is in her late 40s or early 50s. Tall, with a slow and dignified gait, she reveals no emotion in her ebony mask. She apparently accepts silently her preordained role as a polygamous African wife. Her seemingly relentless abnegation and distant behavior do not always match her inner feelings. She goes to her husband's third wedding. If she divorces him, as her daughter Rama suggests, she would lose the privileges conferred on a first wife by Islam. She tells Rama:

"You think I'd find a husband. I'll be a third or fourth wife."

(4)

Awa depends socially and economically on El Hadji. She compromises for emotional security and financial support by reluctantly submitting to the female "sex-role expectations" in her patriarchal Islamic society. Awa's obedience is expected from her community. When her son asks why she should go to witness her husband's wedding, she answers with resignation:

"Unfortunately, I have to go. What would people say?"

Although the rules of a polygamous society shape her conduct, Awa in turn uses these rules to assert her authority over Oumi, El Hadji's second wife. When El Hadji asks Awa to come with him inside Oumi's house, Awa refuses in the name of the marital laws that force her into submission. It is through them that El Hadji's first wife confronts that husband she must otherwise obey. She points out:

"Do you forget I'm your first? Go and say hello for me."

Later, when Awa sits with Oumi in the reception room, Awa calms her co-wife's verbalized frustration with an ironic statement which stresses their forced solidarity. Awa advocates patience since she understands Oumi's feelings against N'Goné, the third wife. Awa had undoubtedly experienced them herself in regards to Oumi. She tells Oumi with a bitter humor:

"Patience does not kill. If so, I would be dead."

When Awa leaves the ceremony, she shows some kinship and understanding as she invites El Hadji's second wife to her house:

"Do come by to see me sometimes. Don't forget I'm your elder."

In XALA, the contrast between Awa and El Hadji's second wife, Oumi, is seen strikingly during a scene of the third wedding where the two women sit together, outcasts to El Hadji's new pride and happiness. Wearing a traditional African dress, Awa chews her stick with the dutiful resignation of a patient village woman. Oumi, who wears a modish wig and a European dress with a voluptuous neckline, bites on the side of her sunglasses, a more modern oral gratification. With great difficulty, she refrains from expressing her rage and discomfort at being a participant at her husband's third wedding, especially since her youth and sophistication might have led her to believe that she had a greater chance of ensuring forever El Hadji's preference. Assured of her sexual appeal, she pitilessly reminds El Hadji (then sexually impotent) of his duties towards her:

"It's my turn. I want you at the house tonight. You know I am always ready."

Oumi arrogantly stands up to El Hadji implying that she would recognize her husband's authority only inasmuch as he also fulfills his sex role. Financially much greedier than Awa (she asks El Hadji for money on the day of the wedding), Oumi remains with her husband until she witnesses the first signs of his downfall. At that point she leaves him. She departs with a truck loaded with the goods and the furniture given to her in El Hadji's wealthier days. Awa embodies a reassuring, stabilized, pure motherliness completely divested and destructive temptress — an archetype usually connected by male authors to man's misery. Oumi leaves El Hadji when he is no longer able to satisfy her sexual demands and economic security.

N'Goné, El Hadji's third wife, only retains Sembene's attention because she illustrates El Hadji's status-seeking greed. El Hadji's kind of social ambitions have been described by John S. Mbiti:

"Polygamy also raises the social status of the family concerned. It is instilled in the minds of African peoples that a big family earns its head great respect in the eyes of the community."

In XALA a long panoramic shot of the endless parade of the gifts displayed by El Hadji as her dowry, stresses the corrupted patterns of such a tradition. (5) N'Goné is merely traded and exhibited to El Hadji's middle-aged friends and colleagues. The film offers a mordant comment on El Hadji's "economics of marriage." El Hadji, rather grossly, praises his "purchase" to the president of the Chamber of Commerce by stressing N'Goné's virginal value as well as that of his other wives when he married them. He tells them:

"My first wife was a virgin and so was my second."

Here virginity reflects a property received intact, thus insuring the groom's prestige. N'Goné's mother acknowledges the groom's prerogatives, as the mother provides the daughter with some last words concerning the daughter's duties as a subservient wife who should only aspire to please her husband. The mother stresses:

“Man is the master, you must always be available. Don't raise your voice. Be submissive.”

Through N'Goné, El Hadji intends to exhibit his social dominance as well as his immediate virility.

N'Goné's role in the film and in El Hadji's life is little more than a "femme objet." This is illustrated on the poster made for the film in which the middle third of her naked back lies in the foreground while the beggar dispossessed by El Hadji stands in a reduced scale in the background. El Hadji himself is seen from the back, departing with his attaché-case. This poster directly presents a graphic correlation between the businessman's sexual and economic impotence. In the film, when El Hadji is preparing for intercourse, N'Goné's naked back is shown in the same position as on the poster, lying motionless on the nuptial bed. At that point the camera swiftly switches from the indifferent body of the "grande horizontale" to her picture hanging on the wall, frozen in the distance as if out of El Hadji's physical reach. N'Goné's photograph seems to be used to emphasize a haunting positive/negative picture of her desirable self whom El Hadji is unable to deflower and "possess."

Like Oumi, N'Goné disassociates herself from El Hadji in his decline since the main purpose of her union with him was financial support for herself and her family.

At this point, it might be interesting to see how Sembene himself sees El Hadji's wives as closely related to the various stages of the male character's life:

“He married his first wife before he became somebody. Having improved his economic and social status, he takes a second wife, who, so to speak, parallels the second historical stage of his life. His third wife, who is his daughter's age but without her mentality, is only there for self-satisfaction: she is submissive (in contrast with his daughter) and only appears once or twice; she is the kind of woman to whom one would say: ‘Be pretty and don't voice your opinions.’”[\(6\)](#)

Here it is important to keep in mind the parallel Sembene draws between the first two wives and the two historical stages of El Hadji's life. Later the same analogy will be set between those two wives and the historical evolution of Senegal.

The other important woman in XALA is Rama, El Hadji's daughter by his first wife. Rama is as aggressive and assertive as N'Goné is passive and submissive. She is as articulate in her speech pattern as N'Goné is

silent. As an unmarried student with intellectual potential and as a young militant for Africanization, Rama confronts her father using Wolof, knowing that he prefers to use French. Puzzled, he asks her:

"Why do you answer in Wolof when I talk to you in French?
Don't you need anything?"

El Hadji reaches for his wallet trying to bridge the gap between them with money. Rama tells him that she does not have any financial needs and that she is only concerned about her mother whom he neglects. She refuses to drink bottled Evian mineral water, which her father drinks and also uses to fill the tank of his Mercedes. Since she is more opposed to what such a French mineral water represents than to the extravagance of its expensive use, her refusal and implicit preference for local spring water has a key political significance. Rama's visit to her father ends when she severely criticizes his third wedding, saying: "Every polygamous man is a liar," upon which he slaps her in the face. According to the African tradition, children are not to confront their elders and girls even less so than boys. Rama's mother Awa is shocked by her daughter's audacity.

Rama stands tall in her father's office as she resists El Hadji. Dressed in the traditional Senegalese boubou, Rama wears a short Afro hairstyle instead of traditional Senegalese braids. For transportation, she rides a moped. This associates her somewhat androgynous appearance with the winged swiftness and freedom of a modern day Amazon.⁽⁷⁾ Rama is not attracted by the luxurious automotive machines of the Western world. She only uses the aspects of Western culture that can serve in daily life – education and modern technology – and does not confer on imported goods the same fetishistic quality as her father. In spite of the concise development of her character, Rama's function in the film is trenchant. Sembene visually stresses her independence of mind as well as her independence as a character by presenting her alone in many more shots than the other female characters. She is not relegated to a stereotypical role as are Oumi and N'Goné.

In XALA, Sembene has schematized his female protagonists. They become archetypical and have a role to play in Sembene's social-political dialectics. Awa, Oumi and Rama are more significant than N'Goné, who is nothing but the most recent status symbol acquired by El Hadji – although we are not to forget that it is she who, indirectly, triggers El Hadji's downfall. The three women are metaphors for Africa. Although these three characters are to be perceived as types, they do not represent all Senegalese women, most of whom still live in rural areas. On a symbolic level, these three female characters are equated with Africa at different periods of its evolution. But geographic limitations in the analogy are neglected, just as the urban Senegalese El Hadji becomes a symbolic embodiment of the African nouveaux riches.

To deal with women characters as metaphors, thus transferring some of their qualities to something other than themselves, appears hazardous. In many instances, this process might simplify and thus dehumanize the

primary characters. It might also reduce or disassociate the object from the symbol for which it stands. As an artist, Sembene's merit lies in his ability to go beyond a mere imitation of reality, beyond his characters' reality, without stultifying or neglecting an important part of such realities. One of Sembene's highest achievements is the successful transposition of his women characters' qualities to the symbolic realm, within which realm his overall political message acquires increased significance.

The women in *XALA* live within the confines of a modern urban polygamous family. In contrast, Islam in previous years had flourished within a traditional African rural context. It was a religion readily accepted by the Senegalese who had already adopted polygamous social patterns within their agricultural society. The more wives, the more hands to cultivate the fields and insure the sustenance of the compound. In such a situation older wives do often welcome younger wives to participate in their domestic and agricultural tasks. Many women recognize the benefit of having additional help in running their households. In such instances co-wives are useful in times of illness and other incapacitation in rural areas.

In *XALA*, El Hadji's wealth has separated the co-wives into different dwellings in an urban environment. For him the more wives, the more prestige and status. The family unit has lost its closeness, and the co-wives envy each other although they hardly know each other. This situation, already present in rural polygamous families, is exaggerated in an urban context. Such a geographic scattering of El Hadji's wives not only adds to his expenses, stress, and dilemma, but it also reduces his authority as a patriarchal figure. His separate houses create new social units headed by his wives; the father and theoretical master of the household is only episodically present. El Hadji's family lives on the fringe of two worlds: Africa and the West. El Hadji himself reflects this hybrid. His amulets, Muslim faith, and Mercedes represent in turn pre-Islamic Africa, Islamic, and Westernized Africa.

Oumi, El Hadji's second wife, is attracted by the mirages of the Western society of consumption. As expected, Sembene shows a limited interest in this character who, although partially westernized, is still part of traditional Africa by her situation within a polygamous marriage. In the film she is merely a caricature. Sembene distrusts her because of her cupidity and her shallowness. She occasionally provides comical relief through the film's satirical depiction of how she affects an excessive Western mannerism. In her eagerness to copy Western mores she fits the traits of the get rich quick middle class, which "... becomes not even the replica of Europe, but its caricature."[\(8\)](#)

Awa (in Wolof her name refers to the original woman called Eve in the Judeo-Christian world without Eve's temptress connotations), although in a transitional world, mostly represents Africa in its essence. Awa is Eve, the giver of life, but even more so she is a model for Senegalese womankind. She personifies the dignity, reserve, patience and loyalty

often attributed by African authors to the traditional African woman. Some of her qualities are described by author Sarah Kala:

“African traditional civilization was an agricultural one. Therefore the role of women is characterized by motherhood, hospitality and life with man. The African woman used to be a strong economic asset and neither polygamy nor the bride price must be regarded as degrading factors. Polygamy is linked with the weaning of children and only the passage to cash economy made the bride price what it is at present. The African woman was an advisor whenever a crisis arose. She was in charge of the education of her children, her daughters especially, and was a complement to her husband.”[\(9\)](#)

Awa is the only wife El Hadji addresses in Wolof. At home with her he recovers his "Africanness." He goes to her after having been deserted by his two other wives. We also expect that it is in her company that he will end his life.

Sembene emphasizes Awa's characteristics by contrasting them to those of Rama, who is very attached to her mother. By assigning Rama this trait, Sembene refers to the traditional “cult of the mother,” which goes back to matriarchal pre-Islamic African societies. Rama wishes to liberate her mother from her polygamous bonds and suggests that Awa divorce. That would be an act that still brands women as outcasts in modern day Senegal, where a woman is socially defined by her husband. Rama is close to her mother, who appears as a custodian of traditional African values. Yet Rama is ready to reject traditional values, which she thinks will hamper the development of Senegal as a modern nation. Her use of Wolof seems a way to recover African identity, as does her refusal to drink the Evian water imported from France, thus showing her opposition to Senegal's economic and cultural dependence on France. One thinks about Fanon who saw in the establishment of Francophony a means used by France to insure its influence in her former empire. Rama rejects the world expressed and implicated through the use of French while Wolof is understood by 90 percent of the Senegalese. She refuses, as Sartre would say, "the alienation which a foreign intellect imposes ... under the name of assimilation.”[\(10\)](#) She also could serve as an illustration of another quotation by Sartre:

"It is thus for the black to die of the white world to be reborn of the black soul, as the platonic philosopher dies of the body to be reborn of the truth.”[\(11\)](#)

Obviously Rama's disagreement with her father goes beyond the usual generation gap. When they try to communicate, they each use a language they assume ideologically, so that language then loses part of its function since it does not allow a dialogue. When El Hadji, the businessman, tries to set their exchange on financial grounds, he increases their disagreement. Sembene explains this clash between father and daughter:

“In XALA, this elderly man who might have talked about Senegalese independence, no longer agrees with his daughter. His daughter implicitly argues with him about a national language. At this point he has lost his authority. There is, however, something that lies behind these problems. XALA takes place in a period of transition. In all periods of transition there is always an opposition to the father because fathers have always a tendency to be conservative.”(12)

Rama is a positive and refreshing counterpart to her father who represents the corrupted bourgeoisie who robs the masses and perpetuates the French neocolonial presence in Africa. She confronts her father and, contrary to her bitterly resigned mother, she vehemently protests against El Hadji's new marriage and polygamy in general. Unattached and single, she is the only woman in XALA who does not have to grant sexual favors for economical support from a man. Although she depends financially on her father, this confers a certain degree of autonomy to Rama as a character and accounts for her outspokenness. The divorce she advocates works on two levels: it is her mother's as well as Senegal's divorce from a paternalistic neo-colonial rule.

Rama is hope, hope for the future when Senegal will be ruled by progressive leaders able to keep the positive aspects of traditional Africa while making use of Western technology. She is the only character in XALA who has succeeded in assimilating both traditional African and European cultures into a coherent synthesis beyond their often-paradoxical nature. She does not reject French culture in its entirety. She uses from Western culture and technology what is useful to her. She embodies Sembene's wishes for a modern and truly independent Africa. According to him:

“This young girl is like a step forward in a society which must find a synthesis. It must do so, but how? One can no longer be traditional but neither can one completely resign oneself to European ways.”(13)

Except in very rare instances, Sembene's works, both in fiction and film, have an abundance of strong and meaningful women characters opposed to weak and/or shallow men. Although he has a background as a Muslim, Sembene has spent almost half of his life outside a strictly Muslim context. And, as a Marxist desiring to reshape Africa, he breaks away with the accepted norm of a male-dominated society; he even defines Marxism as the only viable "therapy" able to cure the present aches of Africa. In a 1978 interview, he declared:

“Marxism-Leninism must be adapted to the realities of a given country. Marxism is a science and Africa has no choice but to adopt and adapt it. It is a medicine for Africa.”(14)

To account for the strength of Sembene's female characters, one has to

refer to the Senegalese environment upon which they were patterned. There, in colonial and neo-colonial times, it has been men, more so than women, who, through education or business, have always had most contacts with the West. Sembene visualizes the men's consequential assimilation as a loss of self and even a psychological castration (to which El Hadji's xala also refers). Sembene contends that traditionally African women, as life sources and links between generations, have been the custodians and the transmitters of African authenticity. From such a perspective, the writer/ filmmaker has aptly chosen heroines as metaphors for Africa. In so doing, he wants to re-endow their fictional status with the strong features that have always been related to their role in the Senegalese society. The Senegalese writer and filmmaker likes to pay homage to African women in terms such as these:

“Africa can't develop without the participation of its women. Our culture used to relegate women to just a minor role. Now women are starting to take a very active part in society. They have never been passive. At decisive moments of African history, women protested and struck. We are still searching for our destiny as Africans. Yet, in the society we are going to build, women will play an important role.”[\(15\)](#)

Sembene's interest in the African woman as a symbol also utilizes the image of women's fecundity, an ontological necessity for Africans. Transmitter of the past, the African woman bears children and as such becomes the custodian of the future. Rama, Awa's daughter, serves as a metaphor for a future Africa, united and powerful, having erased the boundaries imposed by 19th century Western colonialism. Sembene's own Pan-African ideals seem reflected in a shot of Rama as she argues with El Hadji in his office.

Two maps are hanging in this room. A medium shot shows El Hadji sitting at his desk in front of a political map of Africa that depicts its present frontiers. Rama is standing. She wears a Senegalese boubou with purple stripes that match a purple map of Africa shown behind her, one that does not have any national boundaries. Here, the camera, with its power to fix and emphasize objects, supplies the spectator with a symbolic visual representation of Rama/Sembene's ideology. This representation becomes a crucial element in the filmmaker's dialectic narrative based on using African women as metaphors. Also a brief shot of posters of the political heroes Cabral[\(16\)](#) and Samori[\(17\)](#) in Rama's bedroom visually reinforce our sense of her progressive ideas.

In XALA, the picture of Cabral, the socialist African leader, in conjunction with the visual presence and the narrative role of the beggars, embodies the need for a class struggle in Africa. For Sembene, when a political and social system does not correspond to the needs of a given society any more, its structure has to be altered. Samori was a 19th century resistant to French colonialism. The pictures of both Samori and Cabral in Rama's bedroom reflect the continuity of the African struggle throughout the centuries. Sembene presents a message not only

expanded through time but also through space, since Samori was from Mali and Cabral from Guinea-Bissau. Writing about the African woman, Marie Simovey states:

"She must also develop into a new African woman who is sufficiently educated and enlightened to unite the most desirable elements of traditionalism and modernism." [\(18\)](#)

According to other contemporary African women:

"She must break her chains and carry on the same struggle as the man — that of Africa." [\(19\)](#)

Undeniably, the characterization of Rama personifies such aspirations. For Sembene, as it was the case for Marx (concerning women in Western societies), the degree of emancipation of African women is the mirror and the measure of the general emancipation of Africa from its colonial and neocolonial fetters.

Not only must the African woman participate in the struggle for a new Africa, but for Sembene, Africa, in order to grow and truly assert itself, should be fecund and nurturing like a woman. In Africa, more than anywhere else, the woman is seen as the link between generations. She has the privilege of reproduction (her cycles of fecundity parallel those of the earth). In the past, many African societies were matriarchal. In them, matrilineage insured the social and cultural continuity of given communities, whose law and custom have centered around the mother. Traces of such matriarchal customs, such as the importance given to the father's sister and the mother's brother, still exist in present day Africa. Some African religions assert the presence of female water goddesses, from whom life proceeds (there is no goddess in the Jewish or Christian religion). This is additional evidence of the vital use of women as a metaphor in African cultures. For Sembene, who is a product of these cultures, the African woman is earth/ land and "Mother Africa," the genetrix of a new Africa. A woman is fertile like soil and soil is fertile like a woman. Africa is fecund like a woman. Furthermore, El Hadji is impotent (or unable to "plough" the earth/ penetrate the woman) because he has misused the fecundity of Africa/ woman to assert his social and male ascendancy. A true example of the "rapacious bourgeoisie" denounced by Fanon, [\(20\)](#) El Hadji first robbed a peasant (the beggar) of his land and then diverted tons of rice (another fertility symbol) to his own profit. Africa and N'Goné are fecund, but El Hadji is unable to impregnate them because of his socio-economical/ sexual impotence, thus causing the barrenness/ sterility of Africa/ woman. This sexual metaphor represents the crux of Sembene's political message as conveyed through XALA.

Since he defines himself as a modern "griot," [\(21\)](#) Sembene's portrayals of women have the symbolic implications found in the tales and narratives of the ancient oral tradition, whose frequent biting irony is certainly found in XALA. As a storyteller, Sembene performs the ritual incantation of images and words which links reality to metaphor. He

excels in using figurative language to achieve a new, wider, special and more precise meaning. His is the griot's world of imagery, whose source goes as far back as the earliest times of men. That tradition has long accepted that every object in the universe has a twofold significance. Sembene's purpose is not to rely solely on socio-realism while faithfully recording on film all the segments and problems of the Senegalese female population. A griot as well as an artist, he insists that the purpose of African cinema is to inform, educate, and develop the socio-cultural awareness of people by using a dialectic system both within and beyond realism, as in the griot's delivery. Describing the nature of African cinema, Sembene once said:

“The African filmmakers began to get involved in what could be called a committed cinema. We give two meanings to this term. For us, a committed cinema is useful and educational. It is useful because it nourishes the mind and raises awareness in people. It is educational because it teaches them a way to conduct themselves, a way of looking at the future and looking at their own lives. For us filmmakers, it was thus necessary to become political, to become involved in a struggle against all the ills of man: cupidity, envy, individualism, the nouveau-riche mentality and all the things we have inherited from the colonial and neo-colonial system.”[\(22\)](#)

In *XALA*, Awa, Oumi and Rama become symbolic types for a pedagogic demonstration. They represent Africa at various stages of its development. Sembene denounces Oumi by ridiculing her, not because of who she is (an African woman of limited schooling who became El Hadji's second wife) but because of her hybrid nature. The writer-filmmaker favors Awa and Rama. Rama's kinship to Awa is not accidental. Literally and figuratively Rama emerged from Awa's womb. Their link is as strong as the bond existing in ancient Africa, when the magical secrets of curing were passed from mother to daughter. Transitional Africa featured through Oumi has to literally and metaphorically "pack up" (as it happens in the film) her Western material goods and disappear with them since she has distorted them by overrating them. Awa and Rama both remain with the debunked El Hadji. Awa cries at the sight of her husband's humiliation. Rama condescends to speak French to a policeman to protect the beggars and thus help her father who depends on the beggars' good will to regain his virility. The final freeze-frame suggests that both Awa and Rama will share his future life.

In the last scene of *XALA*, the impotent man is surrounded by both the traditional (Awa) and the modern politically committed African woman (Rama) as he expects to recover his manhood. A man again, he will be able to reinstate himself according to the beliefs of the African ontology. Here, one has to bear in mind that in Africa (and *XALA* is primarily geared toward African audiences), a man's sterility (or denial of his biological role) not only affects a man and his immediate family but also

his entire community. Sterile, he faces a metaphysical drama by disrupting the continuity required by the ancestors who might want to come back to earth through his offspring. Although El Hadji has already several children, the meaning of his impotence/ sterility bears a stigma which is much more tragic than in Western societies since it reaches cosmic and religious dimensions. El Hadji's impotence virtually means "death" for him. According to Mbiti, who also defines sex as a sacred action in many African societies:

“He who has many descendants has the strongest possible manifestation of ‘immortality,’ he is ‘reborn’ in the multitude of his descendants, and there are many who ‘remember’ him after he has died physically and entered his ‘personal immortality.’ Such a man has the attitude that ‘the more *we are*, the bigger *I am*.’ Children are the glory of marriage, and the more there are of them the greater the glory.”(23)

El Hadji's new manhood is to be achieved through the sperm-like and purifying spitting of the beggars. Their spitting has a spiritual, moral and physical regenerative function — a rite of passage from one state of being to another. In many African countries, such rituals are connected with simultaneous death and rebirth. The life transitions they represent are met ceremonially and involve magic. It is in such a frame of reference that one has to view the beggars' magical ability to remove the spell they put on El Hadji so that he may be able to regain his penis-talisman. Significantly, it was the beggars' leader who had been dispossessed as a result of El Hadji's misuse of woman/ earth. As Mbiti corroborates, there is a fundamentally religious attitude shown by many Africans concerning "sexual offenses." Mbiti stresses,

“[M]any of the offenses must be followed by a ritual cleansing whether or not the offenders are physically punished, otherwise misfortunes may ensue.”(24)

Women beggars are absent in this spitting ritual. The male beggars who institute El Hadji's sexual rebirth have an appearance — in rags, blind, with one arm, one leg or no legs — that could also refer to both physical and social "castration." The metaphoric impact of such a dispossessed brotherhood would certainly have been lessened had women been included among the beggars. Their absence should by no means be attributed to a biased choice on Sembene's part but rather to a symbolic continuum: the curse of male impotency as it is put and removed by the same male, the blind leader of the beggars. Sembene's choice was also probably made for the sake of verisimilitude. In present day Senegal, female beggars are mostly seen in the streets of downtown Dakar with young children, even babies. It would be too conspicuous and too risky, with possible scuffles with the police and even imprisonment, to allow women with children to march to Awa's house, in an affluent Dakar neighborhood.

As El Hadji endures the beggars' ritual trial to regain his virility, he is grotesquely crowned by one of the beggars with a white orange flower

crown (formerly worn by N'Goné as part of her wedding attire). It is a reminder of the virginity of the woman he was not able to deflower/possess. At this time, two oppressed segments of the Senegalese society have much in common. As an oppressed minority within a male dominated Islamic society, women's status parallels that of the deprived Senegalese masses repressed by the same patriarchal bourgeoisie. Such is Sembene's statement about the political aspect of sex in societies such as Senegal. The griot-filmmaker's final images imply that the two groups' emancipation is joined and interrelated.

In Ousmane Sembene's mind, Senegal, emasculated by its colonial inheritance, will have to find its authentic roots, the sap necessary to its future blooming. XALA demonstrates that the dynamic growth of Senegal and also Africa relies primarily on Awa (traditional Africa) and Rama (new Africa), although Oumi (transitional Africa) also reflects a moment of its history. If those three women are metaphors of Africa, they are part of a nourishing and fecund flow and are neither reduced nor objectified in a static and dry set of symbols. Sembene only simplifies their reality, omitting details that might distract from his message. Their problems as women, although set in parallel with other political issues, are not minimized.

One should not make the mistake of considering them within a Western frame of reference foreign to the Senegalese reality. Seen as images and symbols rather than purely ideal figures, the real position of these women in society is dealt with critically by the filmmaker as he implicitly condemns female subservience and polygamy. Through his portrayals of Awa, Oumi and Rama, Sembene unravels some of the myths and misconceptions surrounding African women, often seen by the West as exotic creatures dancing to the rhythm of a sensuous drum. Sembene portrays the women characters as both human beings and symbols without however erasing their humanity.

Truly, Sembene perceives those women from a male perspective, as exemplified by the very title of the film. Certainly his female characters are strong. Do they appear thus only because the male counterpart, caught in a crisis situation, is extremely weak? There is a need for women artists to depict women's existence themselves, such as is being done by Senegalese women writers Aminata Sow Fall and Mariama Ba, or the woman filmmaker Safi Faye. Yet the work of such women is only budding and it would be premature to attempt any critical comparison in this area. One has to acknowledge, however, the fact that Ousmane Sembene avoids many of the biases and limitations usually enacted by male writers or filmmakers as they explore female psyches. He reveres the strengths of Senegalese women and through restoring their pride and dignity he restores those of Africa. Most importantly in XALA, Sembene chooses to equip his spokeswoman, Rama, a new breed of Senegalese woman, with no ideological male counterpart in the film, and he gives her the kind of commitment necessary for the development "à l'africaine" of the African continent.

Notes

1. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1979), p. 179. This book was first published by François Maspero (Paris, 1961) under the title *Les Damnés de la Terre*.
2. Frantz Fanon, p. 149.
3. Frantz Fanon, p. 165.
4. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), p.180.
5. Many Africans, among them the female Senegalese writer and journalist Annette M'Baye, state that dowry (cattle, food, materials) used to be a proof of the seriousness of the groom's intention. He was making gifts to his wife's family as a token of his good intentions and ability to support a spouse. It is usually believed that Western capitalism and colonialism distorted the primary function of such a dowry by placing emphasis on the trade pattern in which the wife was merely "purchased" in exchange for material goods.
6. Noureddine Ghali, "Ousmane Sembene," *Cinéma 76*, No. 208 (April, 1976), p. 88. Translated by Françoise Pfaff.
7. Here the term "modern day Amazon" suggests that Rama is related to both modernism and African traditionalism. Ai'cha N'Doye writes about the Amazons of African history: "The famous Amazons of the King of Dahomey are witnesses of the part played by the females in war and fights." Ai'cha N'Doye, "Initiative and Creative Powers of Women in Traditional Economic Life: The Senegal Example," in the collected papers of the Conference of the Society of African Culture, held in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, July 3-8, 1972: *La Civilisation de la Femme dans la Tradition Africaine* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1975), p. 275.
8. Frantz Fanon, p. 175.
9. Sarah Kala, *La Civilisation de la Femme dans la Tradition Africaine*, p. 92.
10. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Black Orpheus* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1976), pp. 30 and 31.
11. Ibid.
12. From a series of interviews with Ousmane Sembene, conducted by myself during the summer of 1978.
13. Jean and Ginette Delmas, "Ousmane Sembene: Un Film est un Débat," *Jeune Cinéma*, Dec. 1976-Jan. 1977, p. 16. Translated by Françoise Pfaff.
14. Pfaff interview with Sembene, 1978.

[15.](#) Ibid.

[16.](#) Amilcar Cabral, although killed before the independence of Guinea-Bissau, is considered one of its main liberators from Portuguese rule.

[17.](#) Samori Touré was for a time the architect of a resurrected Mali empire who opposed French colonialism in Africa at the end of the 19th century. Captured in 1898, he died in 1900 in exile in Gabon. Sembene's future project in terms of filmmaking is an epic about this early fighter against French colonialism.

[18.](#) Marie Simovey, *La Civilisation de la Femme dans la Tradition Africaine*, p. 494.

[19.](#) B. Zadi Saourou and S. Ehouman, Ibid., p. 108.

[20.](#) Frantz Fanon, p. 168.

[21.](#) Sembene defines the griot as a character similar to the European minstrel: a man of learning and common sense who is the historian, the raconteur, the living news and the conscience of his people. (Pfaff interviews, 1978).

[22.](#) From a lecture delivered by Ousmane Sembene at the School of Communications, Howard University, March 1975.

[23.](#) John Mbiti, p. 186.

[24.](#) John Mbiti, p. 193.

Xala

A cinema of wax and gold

by Teshome H. Gabriel

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Ousmane Sembene possesses the vision of a committed cineaste of social change. All his films, self-critical ones, offer constructs to interpret the cultural jumble that covers Africa. In the Sembenian universe, film depicts not simply individuals bereft of context, caught between the traditional and the modern or the foreign and domestic, but shows the collision of two mutually exclusive symbol-systems, which serve their own set of icons and are equally arbitrary and mutually worthless to each other.

Whereas in *EMITAI* and *CEDDO*, two historical films set in rural Africa, Sembene deals with Africans' isolation in a colonial environment, in *BAROM SARRET*, *TUAW*, *BLACK GIRL* and *MANDABI* he treats individuals' alienation as they live between two cultures in contemporary Africa.⁽¹⁾ In *XALA* (pronounced "halla") Sembene portrays a man seemingly successful in both worlds and both systems. Here, unlike in the other films, the African has at last gained access to and mastered both value systems, but his very stance leaves him vulnerable.

The film centers on El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye (El Hadji is a title meaning "pilgrim" and in Islam it refers to one who has been to Mecca and has come back holy). He is the prototype of the emerging African bourgeoisie, who destroy the continent, politically and economically in the name of "African Socialism" and "Progress." To Sembene, this new class of nouveau riche in Africa presents a much more sinister force than the openly exploitative European colonialists. Formerly the colonialists could be readily identified by race, language, dress, custom, manner of worship, etc. In contrast, the new enemy insidiously shares all the Africans' outward aspects and cultural attributes and has assumed his inimical role through a conscious political choice.

As the film opens, we note the transfer of power taking place in an unnamed African country. To "spice-up" the independence celebration, El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye, a board member in a "Chamber of Commerce," announces his third marriage to the 19-year-old N'Goné, the same age as his daughter, Rama. Unfortunately, the weight of El Hadji's fifty years and his psychological make-up prevent him from consummating the marriage. El Hadji believes himself hexed — someone, an enemy, has put the spell of "xala," impotence, upon him. He suspects his two wives and even a colleague. His increasing anxiety and desperation as he seeks to break the spell of xala sets the film's pace. El Hadji goes from one *marabout* to another, from wife to wife, searching for the cause and cure of his lost virility. His wallet grows lighter as he must pay for each visitation. He becomes so obsessed with regaining his potency that he neglects his work as a member of the "Chamber of Commerce." Quite literally he becomes impotent not only in the bedroom, but also in the boardroom.

XALA is on one level a comedy. El Hadji's desire to regain his "manhood" (as he defines it) is presented in an extremely humorous way. The film illustrates a simple moral tale of a man who loses everything as a result of living beyond his age and means. On another level, however, the film offers a poignant satire about Africa's neo-colonial leaders.

"WAX AND GOLD" AS A METHOD

The film language of XALA, I believe, can be constructed on the model of an African poetic form called "sem-enna-worq" which literally means "wax and gold."[\(2\)](#) The term refers to the "lost wax" process in which a goldsmith creates a wax form, casts a clay mold around it, then drains out the wax and pours in molten gold to form the valued object. Applied to poetics, the concept acknowledges two levels of interpretation, distinct in theory and representation. Such poetic form aims to attain maximum ideas with minimum words. "Wax" refers to the most obvious and superficial meaning. But the "gold" embedded in the artwork offers the "true" meaning, which may be inaccessible unless one understands the nuances of folk culture.

In the novel *Xala*, the structural key that explains the story's surface political meaning links a sexual metaphor with a sociological message.[\(3\)](#) In the film XALA to unearth the "gold," we must go beyond the manifest content and beyond the sexual metaphor. To restore the "gold" in its purity in XALA means, therefore, to perform an autopsy to remove the "wax," the comedy format, in order to gain access to the text's ideology.

How does Sembene, the filmmaker, help us discover the ideological underpinnings, which lie mute within the comedic form? What arrays of cultural codes and filmic modes does he employ to mark the film's immanent meaning? His search for African cinema, I believe, comes in his use of these two modes of discourse. What follows, therefore, is a

two-pronged study and investigation of XALA. The first section deals with the cultural fabrics of the film and the second section with the film style.

CULTURAL CODES

Many symbols in the film expose the manipulators of the new social order — the westernized Africans who like chameleons are ready to change their appearance to protect their selfish interests. At the film's beginning the board members in the "Chamber of Commerce" (euphemism for government) wear native dress as they acknowledge their assumption of political/ economic power. They then change into well cut, European, three-piece suits once they reach the boardroom's sanctity. Similarly, the secretary of El Hadji's warehouse wears a traditional African dress while outside in the streets, but once in the office she takes off this outer layer to reveal a European dress underneath.

El Hadji's two wives represent the duality that has become Africa. The first wife, Adja Awa Astou (Adja refers to a female pilgrim), is a woman with dignity and wears the traditional African dress. She understands the institution of polygamy, which in her wisdom and womanhood she knows she cannot change. She accepts the traditional role of service to her husband without undue concern for money and success. The second wife, Oumi N'Doye, never talks to El Hadji except about sex and money. She, unlike Awa, who always speaks Wolof, almost always addresses El Hadji and her children in French. She likes western dress and likes to appear sexy. She stands as a symbolic figure of neo-colonial destruction.

The choice of language spoken throughout the film is also symbolic in the way it is used. The use of French in XALA clearly sets those acculturated to European ways apart from the masses who speak Wolof and are seen as the preservers of indigenous culture. El Hadji speaks French throughout to the disgust of his progressive daughter Rama:

El Hadji: (angrily) Rama, why do you answer in Wolof when I speak to you in French!?

Rama: (in Wolof) Father, have a good day.[\(4\)](#)

Acting as her father's conscience, questioning his motives and behavior, not intimidated by him, Rama also represents the omni-present and omniscient voice behind the film. As the hope of liberated Africa, all progressive statements in the film are associated with her.

El Hadji (angrily) Who are "dirty dogs," Rama?

Rama: Men!

El Hadji: Why are they "dirty dogs"?

Rama: Every polygamous man is a liar!

El Hadji: (astounded but firmly) Say that again?!

Rama: Every polygamous man is a liar.

In the special meeting of the board called to determine the advisability of retaining El Hadji in the administration, El Hadji is summoned to answer for misuse of funds and for writing bad checks. Here, however, he uses the same words of his daughter Rama against his adversaries. Furthermore, his request to speak in Wolof rather than French indicates a reversal in his moral character:

Board Member: El Hadji, the colonial period is finished. We govern the country. You collaborate with the government, Big Mouth!

El Hadji: President, I will speak in Wolof.

Board Member: President, point of order! In French, old boy. The official language is French.

President: Calm down, act civilized. El Hadji, you may speak but in French. Even the insults in the purest tradition of Francophonic.

El Hadji: Each one of us is a "dirty dog." I repeat, "dirty dogs," probably worse than I. We are crabs in a single basket. We have all given bad checks ...

The entire spectrum of symbols used in the film reminds us of Africa-in-otherness flirting with Africa-rooted-in-its-own. All the cited cultural codes serve as open symbols whose meaning is quite literal, i.e., Africa stripped off her cultural identity. The film also explicitly criticizes those who command political and economic power. It critiques their myopic vision of independence and their confused mixing of their class interests with those of African liberation.

THE CLASS CODE

Throughout the film, there is a game of opposition between the nouveau riche and the people — those who speak French and those who do not — those assimilated by the system and those who are its rejects. These two groups share a common heritage and a form of interdependency. Their paths, however, differ in one crucial area — wealth.

Sembene wastes no time in making a dialectical logic of the two classes' intersection. A band of crippled beggars make us uneasy, but as we follow the lives of the affluent, it is the bourgeoisie's class nature that dominates.⁽⁵⁾ The beggars are often seen but, except for the theme music that comments on their situation, they are not heard, so they remind us of harsh realities in urban Africa mutely.

The film's use of mass beggars offers a real picture of urban Africa. Sembene depicts the less fortunate as victims of the bourgeoisie, who

deprive them of basic needs and view them with utter contempt. The beggars do not have a way to redress wrongs done to them. In their despair, therefore, after El Hadji has been stripped of his wealth and his second and third wife have deserted him, they confront him in Awa's villa. (Since Awa represents traditional Africa, El Hadji's return to her symbolizes the exile's complete return to his roots.) Seated like a tribal jury, this band tells El Hadji that they alone can cure his impotence.

El Hadji: (as he emerges from his bedroom in pajamas)
What is this, "robbery"?!

Gogul, the blind man: Robbery, no, "Vengeance!!" Our story goes back a long time ago, before your first marriage with this lady. What I have become is your fault. You appropriated our inheritance. You falsified our names and we were expropriated. I was thrown in prison. I am of the Beye family. Now I will get my revenge. I arranged your xala....If you want to be a man, undress nude in front of everyone. We will spit on you.

Again, it is the concern for self which motivates El Hadji to submit himself to this debasement and revenge by the beggars, whom he had once called human rubbish." The symbolic class implications are enormous.

Sembene does not use stereotypes such as depicting the exploiter as ridiculously evil and the exploited as simply heroic. In XALA we feel empathy for both El Hadji and the beggars. Sembene warns the emerging bourgeoisie not to lose sight of its own trauma and inevitable fall from power. At the same time, the filmmaker clearly shows a difference between human nature and the corrupting influence of imposed systems and cultures on Africa.

"Xala," in fact, indicates a "temporary sexual impotence"; "temporary" suggests that the bourgeois era will end one day. It also implies that the new bourgeoisie, when reeducated and having undergone proletarianization, will become active and valuable cadres when the dominated class seizes power. Just as the oppressed offer a cure for El Hadji's xala, therefore, so too they do for Africa.

What has given most viewers of XALA an uncertain feeling of the film's ending is the ritual of spitting on El Hadji. The scene challenges spectators to forget their viewing habits, to fight conventional codes and to attend to an experience — a new code. The spitting seems like a vomiting of bile — a symbolic social act. Its treatment in film language makes it a powerful "trope" of cinematic rhetoric to connote the bourgeoisie's spiritual deterioration and material decadence, and the common people's expression of anger against that class. Furthermore, the spitting on El Hadji helps reincorporate him into the people's fold. In other words, the ritual becomes a folk method of purgation, which makes El Hadji a literal incarnation of all members of the class or group that spit on him and consequently reintegrates him into folk society.

FILMIC CODES

If we accept the notion that artistic choice also connotes ideological choice, we must begin to investigate the ideological weight carried by a film's formal elements. Spectator involvement in XALA does not come, I contend, from the plot and story structure alone but also from the execution of some basic cinematic elements such as editing, composition, camera positioning and movement.

Sembene acts effectively in XALA in his editing strategy and composition within the frame. An excellent instance of his editing comes in the sequence of the wedding reception, an event documenting the foibles of the emerging bourgeoisie. Two men, a minister and a deputy, meet at a doorway:

Deputy: Mr. Minister, after you.

Minister: No, Mr. Deputy, after you.

Deputy: No, Minister, you are the government representative.

Minister: But you represent the people.

Deputy: I will wait.

Minister and Deputy: Let us wait.

They remain erect by the door. In the next shot we see the bride's mother and aunt cutting up the meat, followed by a shot of the wedding cake where everyone is waiting for a share. Here are two government officials splitting the nation into halves by claiming they represent either "the people" or "the government." They gut Africa as if it were a piece of meat where people assemble to get their share.

In terms of composition, there are two examples in the film that are indeed remarkable. One is at the wedding reception. We see the bride's mother and aunt, Ya Binta, coming towards the camera to greet El Hadji's first and second wife who enter the frame from the right side. The camera lingers on this shot while we listen to them exchange greetings. We notice their dress — all have African dresses except El Hadji's second wife, Oumi. But the dress worn by the bride's aunt reveals the film's whole nature and complexity. She wears a most colorful dress that appears, at first sight, authentically African; however, it is spotted with white figures which look like Queen Elizabeth of England.

In another instance, the manner in which composition of film takes greater meaning is in El Hadji's warehouse office where Rama, seated in front of a map of Africa, talks to her father. (Note the double entendre in the dialogue. According to folk habit, xala is usually attributed to the first wife's jealousy, so that in private and public quarters Awa will be

blamed for it.)

El Hadji: Rama, my child, sit down. How is school?

Rama: I do my best. And the activities?

El Hadji: Ok, ok. Everything all right at home?

Rama: Yes.

El Hadji: Did your mother send you?

Rama: No, I came on my own. I am old enough to understand certain things.

El Hadji: (suspecting that she might be referring to his xala) Understand what?!

Rama: Mother is suffering.

El Hadji: Is she sick?

Rama: Physically, no. I remind you, father, that mother is your first wife.

El Hadji: I know, my daughter. I will come by. Tell her so.

Rama: No, she doesn't know I have come.

Before Rama stands up to walk out of the frame, Sembene makes us take note of the map of Africa behind her once again. We notice too that the color of the map reflects the exact same colors of Rama's traditional boubou, native costume — blue, purple, green and yellow — and it is not divided into boundaries and states. It denotes pan-Africanism.

El Hadji: My child, you don't need anything? (He searches his wallet)

Rama: Just mother's happiness. (She then walks out of the frame as the camera lingers on the map)

What Sembene is saying to us is quite direct and no longer inaccessible. On one level, Rama shows concern for her mother — it occupies a place of meaning in the dialogue. On another level, when we consider the African map, which occupies the same screen space as Rama, her concern becomes not only her maternal mother but also "Mother Africa." This notion carries an extended meaning when we observe the shot of El Hadji — to his side we see a huge colonial map of Africa. The "wax" and "gold" are posited jointly by a single instance of composition. Two realities fight to command the frame, but finally the "gold" meaning leaps out and breaks the boundaries of the screen.

Low and high angle shots, common connotative devices in filmmaking,

abound in XALA. Their use in the film has visual and ideological meaning. I will cite three examples to illustrate how shots acquire ideological signification.

As the film is introduced to us, in a quick visual montage and a voice-over narration on "African Socialism," we see the colonial representatives leave, taking their miniature statues and busts of white figures with them. Immediately following, the new government of Africans enter a huge building — they are shot from a low angle, a shot that connotes power. The next time we see them, shot from a high angle, which diminishes the people depicted, they are opening briefcases full of money, handed to them by the whites we saw leaving just a short while back.

In the high angle shot of the boardroom we see the members of the Chamber seated around what appears to be a pool table. The color is green, the color of money which their business meeting will generate. The six men seated around the table seem to represent the six pool table pockets. In the meeting room, a white advisor stands in the background, like an overseer as in the colonial era, still visible and still calling the shots. The composition makes us realize that any change in power is merely illusory and only cosmetic.

Gorgul, the blind man, the leader of the beggars, does not have many lines (he does not speak until a few minutes before the film ends), but has visual importance. All through the film when the beggars are shown, we see the blind man singled out, shot mostly from a low angle, giving him an appearance of some kind of power and a sense of majesty. When the film's point of view coincides with that of the other beggars, however, we see him shot at eye-level.

So long as there exists a "cultural curtain" falling between peoples and nations, knowing how films articulate space and time becomes crucial to understanding films coming from a geographical and cultural distance. African films (or other Third World films, for that matter) when shown outside of their cultural context tend to lose their message. Therefore, the degree to which films transcend the "cultural curtain" becomes critical to any discussion of film's effectiveness.⁽⁶⁾ These matters often depend on the issue of film's spatial-temporal significations.

In XALA, there is one continuous scene which calls attention to itself. It is a scene where Modu, El Hadji's chauffeur, opens a bottle of imported mineral water (El Hadji's favorite drink), empties it into the Mercedes' radiator, discards the empty bottle, and closes the hood. Screen time here is identical to the actual time it would take in real life. Any U.S. film student might be tempted to shorten the scene without any loss in "meaning." But the issue is not what the film lacks, but what it possesses. We must interpret the scene as it is coded. We need to remember that of all the characters in XALA, Modu is the only person engaged in any kind of labor. Sembene, a man understanding Marx and Lenin, does not want the scene's implication to go unnoticed. The scene, therefore, forces time to become space and space to become time to

emphasize these elements, and the comedy, inherent in the character's labor.

Another instance of Sembene's use of time and space occurs in the last few scenes, when El Hadji submits to the beggars who spit on him. First, the camera pans (a shot that maintains integrity of the space) around the proud figure of El Hadji standing half-naked, the spittle covering his shoulders and chest. The camera then registers a medium shot of his son and daughter standing by watching their father's humiliation and lingers on an intimate image of Awa in tears. Then time is stuck, frozen — the image of El Hadji is caught as in a freeze frame. And we too must stop for a moment to ponder the meaning of this man and his suffering. Since we cannot rely on El Hadji to "stay put" in the predicted space offered by the changing world of the screen, we are denied any easy identification with his fate. We skip to a different period — the time of the Independence celebration. Time has played a cruel trick on El Hadji and the class he represents. We watch and reconstruct a picture of Africa which allows us to be analytical and objective and demands of us that we take sides.

XALA is not simply another film made by an African which treats African themes and elements. It does not rely on the concepts and propositions of conventional cinema, be it American, Russian or European. XALA uniquely takes African folk-narrative tradition and translates it fully into filmic form.

Cinema does not have to tell a story only one way. It does not have to perpetuate the status quo. The meaningful road to African cinema lies in a cinema that draws from the wealth of its cultural and aesthetic traditions. XALA marks and signals a turning point in the development of African cinema in that folk-narrative tradition and cinema acquire a measure of peaceful coexistence. This requires the establishment of a new cinematic code, one which will evolve its own system, governed by its own set of rules and criteria of excellence. This brief study has attempted to critically appraise the code-in-information and the direction of a new cinema — a cinema of wax and gold.

Notes

1. Ousmane Sembene has directed nine films including XALA. THE SONGHAI EMPIRE, made as a thesis film under Donskoi and Guerassimov in the Soviet Union, has never been distributed. BOROM SARRET (1963) is a nineteen-minute short with no dialogue but a voice-over commentary which documents a day in the life of a horse-cart driver. NIAYE (1964), another short, treats the subject of incest, suicide and murder with a voice-over narration of an African griot. LA NOIRE DE... (1966) is a story of a young African woman who cannot speak French but is taken to France as a maid. MANDABI (1969), a feature film, tells the tale of a simple old man and the ironies of life in modern Dakar, Senegal. Ibrahima Dieng, the lead character, is a person broken; the modern system has outstripped the cultural values that nurtured him. TAUW (1970), a twenty-minute film, presents a young man who

cannot find employment in Senegal's dominant neo-colonialist system and depicts the hopelessness and modern bureaucratic maze in Senegal. *EMITAI* (1971) shows the courageous resistance of the Dialo women against the French in the closing days of the Second World War. *CEDDO* (1977), Sembene's latest feature, treats the subject of Muslim imperialism. "Ceddo," meaning "outsiders," represents Africans who resisted wholesale conversion to Islam. Except for *MANDABI*, which is distributed by Grove Press Films, *BOROM SARRET*, *LA NOIRE DE*, *TAUW*, *EMITAI*, *XALA* and *CEDDO* are distributed by New Yorker Films. *THE SONGHAI EMPIRE* and *NIAYE* are not available in the United States.

2. 'Sem-enna-worq' is a favorite form of poetry in Ethiopia. The concept, however, exists in most African languages. For its unique uses and meaning, see, Donald Levine, *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).

"Because we have understood the political nature of our role, we had noticed that we have far more followers than any political party or any religious faith in Africa. But that was not enough for us, because the masses — which really don't have a face, which are an abstraction — the masses have given us the support that we need. And they have helped us to go beyond the ethnic problems of language and have become our allies. This has come about because we have been moving toward the masses. These were not meetings to get elected, but to give the people an awareness that they were the only ones who could decide their fate and to make them recognize that their own culture and their own languages have as much culture inherent in them as any other culture does in any other language. And cinema itself could replace the traditional story telling activity, the traditional legends, because the filmmaker himself becomes a storyteller. So it is up to the filmmaker to explain his work as much as possible. But once he has completed the work, the work goes beyond him and he loses control of it. So, for us the filmmaker's role appears to be very explicit, very clear." — Taped interview with Sembene Ousmane conducted by Teshome Gabriel, January 1975.

3. Sembene, Ousmane, *Xala* (Westport, Conn.: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1976). *Xala*, the novel, differs significantly from the film version. The book explores interpersonal relations and individual inner states more fully.

For instance, in the novel El Hadji's negative side comes from his own nature and attitudes towards others, whereas the film captures his negative side mostly by a contrast established between his life style and that of the beggars. The film omits many family relationships; for instance, Awa's father is presented as a Christian character in the novel, and Rama has a fiancé, Pathe, a psychiatrist with whom Rama discusses

her father's xala. Dimensions of Oumi, Asa, and Rama's personal and family lives are altogether left out in the film version.

4. Most of the dialogue in this study is taken from the film itself.

5. Although I have referred to beggars continuously, Sembene shows a peasant among them (not in the novel) representing the destitute rural workers. When a skillful pickpocket, Thierry (the man who replaces El Hadji as a board member), steals the money his villagers gave him to buy food, ashamed to return to the village, he joins the beggar band in the city. Sembene includes a peasant in an urban setting so that the national issue will not be forgotten.

6. If a spectator's initial introduction to Sembene's filmic work is, for instance, either *EMITAI* or his latest feature *CEDDO*, both employing a collective heroism and shot in social space, one might conclude that Sembene does not understand the value of intimate shots. However, in an earlier film, *MANDABI*, shot with individual space and much camera intimacy, Sembene has shown mastery of close-up shots. In fact, anyone who has seen the film is sure to remember the face, the feet and even the nostril of the lead character, Ibrahima Dieng. The details remain in our visual memory. In each of the above cases, one thing is certain — Sembene's search for an African cinema is evident. In each instance, style modifies subject matter.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Bottle Babies Grave markers

by Howard Z. Lorber and Margo Cornelius

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“During my residence in England, at least twenty or thirty persons have died of simple starvation under the most revolting of circumstances, and a jury has rarely been found possessed of the courage to speak the plain truth in the matter ... But indirectly, far more than directly, many have died of starvation, where long continued want of proper nourishment has called forth fatal illness, when it has produced such debility that causes which might otherwise have remained inoperative brought on severe illness and death. The English working-men called this 'social murder' ...” — Frederic Engels: *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*

Peter Krieg's BOTTLE BABIES is a film depicting “social murder” — the killing and maiming of African children in the name of profit. It also depicts Africa's underdevelopment. Krieg documents how human values have become distorted in a dialectic between engendered desire and multinational commercial exploitation. In this case the mothers' desire is to use baby formula and bottle feeding instead of their own milk. It has disastrous results.

The film opens in Nairobi, Kenya. A healthy mother carries her screaming infant to the hospital. In a voice over, a doctor lists its symptoms: diarrhea, vomiting, swollen stomach, depressed eyes and fontanel, rapid pulse, irregular breathing. The baby is dying of malnutrition.

The scene is common enough in underdeveloped nations, but the mother is not even of the poorest poor. “What these babies have in common,” the film states after showing a ward of similar cases, “is that they are bottle fed.” The film presents a syndrome called variously “bottle baby disease,” “lacto syndrome,” “commerciogenic malnutrition.”

The villain in Krieg's film is the multinational Nestle Company, producer and international distributor of several brands of powdered baby formula. In search of the increased profits necessary to capitalist enterprise, Nestle has actively moved into the Third World market with aggressive advertising and promotional campaigns. As the film's narrator states,

“For other than in the industrialized countries where declining birth rates led to stagnating sales, the markets in the population rich developing countries seems unlimited.”

The film pinpoints these advertising campaigns as why healthy mothers give up cheap, safe and convenient breastfeeding in lieu of formula. And giving up breastfeeding means losing the capacity to breastfeed a child. So the mother is, in effect, stuck: she cannot do other than bottle feed, regardless of consequences. By persuading a mother to bottle feed, the promotional campaigns ensure a continued market for their products.

The film builds its case by a series of counter positions. We hear a dispassionate, orderly, discursive narration while we see horrific images of crying infants, suffering "bottle baby disease" in hospital wards or having drip-bottle needles inserted in their veins. We hear in detail the presumably "correct" or idealized product directions. Then a sequence depicts the squalid reality of urban slums and impoverished rural areas that precludes following these directions. We see overworked hospital staffs' trying to persuade others to continue to breastfeed, while Nestle gives away free promotional formula kits and bottles. As the narration explains the causes of commerciogenic malnutrition, the film shows Nestle's slick, colorful posters presenting sleek, healthy babies with bottle in hand.

The film climaxes with powerful images and juxtapositions. Radios blare jingles and colorful billboards depict the great variety of Nestle's products. Cinematically, the power of advertising is "explained." Finally we see an infant necropolis, with babies' graves marked by bottles and formula tins. Even in death, "the mothers believe they have done the best for their babies." The film juxtaposes those graves to images of the huge, modern buildings comprising Nestle's corporate headquarters; the company's glowing profit reports; and corporate pique at the Swiss Third World Group's published exposé entitled, "Nestle Kills Babies."

The image of the infants' graves marked by formula tins and bottles is both poignant and an indictment of the formula producers and distributors. Advertising campaigns directly claim that formula is the "white man's powder that will make baby grow and glow." Mothers in the hospital are hooked by maternity ward give-aways, posters and calendars, and field workers dressed like nurses who extol powdered milk's virtues and discourage breastfeeding. In these ways, mothers are not simply trapped into bottle feeding by losing their milk producing capacity. They are prompted to be "modern" by using formula. This prompting is part of an old and complex process in which,

psychologically and culturally, the dominant class in a social formation sets the rules and the values by which the "good life" is judged. Indeed, the Greek word "aristocracy" means, "rule by the best."

In the colonial world, the indigenous people heard time and again that they were inferior to the colonizers — morally, religiously, socially, technically, physically. They heard that to improve their lot they must adopt Western ways, and in many instances the colonized people were forced to adopt them. In the minds of many of the Third World peoples, to use baby formula marks a rise from "inferior" to "superior" culture. Mothers may believe themselves in this way to be both modern and doing well for their children. Yet such "modernity" kills Third World children.

Clearly the mothers do not realize this. In areas that have a very high infant mortality rate, children's health and development means very much to the people. Especially in much of Africa, children are valued not only in themselves but as additions to the wealth of the family group. Indigenous wealth does not so much reside in controlling goods but in forming social relations of which goods are only an extension. By focusing on children's health and well-being, the Nestle promotional campaigns directly link bottle use to fears about childhood death. These campaigns continually insist that the bottle is the best method of feeding if mothers want healthy children.

And if, as is often the case with peasant and tribal peoples, material things become invested with special powers particular to their usage, the advertisements and promotional campaigns reinforce the notion that the formulas and bottles have in them the magical power to effect children's health and well-being. Thus mothers become emotionally dependent on formula, caught in a complex dialectic between the cultural forces of their past and their present. On the one hand, the advertising campaigns push them to reject their primitive past in the face of an engendered faith in and desire for the modern" future. On the other hand, the ads continue the cultural past in a highly distorted way, which invests new cultural items with the magical powers from the past.

It is no wonder that some mothers archaic belief that "the bottles themselves have power" becomes reinforced and that other mothers use the artifacts of bottle feeding as the paltry furnishings of their infants' graves. As exemplified in the mothers using formula tins and bottles as grave markers, significant magico-symbolic items of the child's life become symbolic of the child in death. However, such an image really only indicates a larger concrete reality, underdevelopment, of which formula use comprises but one aspect. Krieg's film implicitly but not explicitly demonstrates the underdevelopment process as a series of events that continually reduce the Third World nations' ability to become economically and politically independent.

Poor parents spend a huge proportion of their income (one-third to one-half, the film states) on formula. Consequently, this market provides a vast outflow of foreign exchange needed for multinationals' capital

development. Yet from infant malnutrition grows brain damage and a degradation of the population. From induced poverty grows a larger and larger reserve army of the poor, who must find work at any price to support the purchase of needed exports such as formula.

And advertisement and product promotion are calculated to engender new needs. Such tactics affect the poor (and nearly poor) most of all. These people, seeing the growth of "wealth and progress" amongst their national bourgeoisie, hope for that kind of better life but cannot attain it. So they reach for the small symbols of "progress," one of which is powdered milk formula.

Promoting a reliance on bottle feeding and other "symbols of progress" builds the changes necessary to modern capitalist expansion: a consumer society inserts objects between humans, mediating their relations — in this case the relation of nurturance.

To mediate social relations by things is an aspect of what Marx called "commodity fetishism." Ultimately all social relations take on value through the exchange of objects. Human-properties — ideas, sentiments, beliefs, desires — become regarded as if they were objects. In the film, using formula comes between people, forming a barrier that marks them off from each other as possessor and desirer. The poor, seeking to emulate the bourgeoisie, buy commodities such as formula, believing that in so doing they are, albeit slowly, surmounting the barrier between the "good life" and abasement, between those who have wealth and those who labor.

Yet the objective difference between rich and poor remains — and grows wider with every purchase. The non-material social cohesion of indigenous cultures becomes destroyed. Relations become valued by and in virtue of exchange. The commodity — here the bottle — and its exchange both in purchase and nursing become a representation of human relations, even a focus of veneration. Thus the term commodity fetishism well applies, since the bottle attains magico-religious significance.

In "reaching for the small symbols of progress," poor Africans play out a kind of "religious drama." They venerate the object which mediates relations between themselves, between their poverty and their well being, between the reproduction of social life and living itself.

The ongoing movement toward commodity fetishism in all underdeveloped areas is a necessary one for capitalist development, a direct product of imperialism. Third World markets, slowly but carefully fostered under colonialism, absorb more and more of the excess production of capital. Social relations become more and more valued in terms of possessing modern (i.e., imported) things.

If they expand purchases of imported commodities, such as formula, importing nations further and further lose their capacity to reproduce their own material and social life. They experience an enforced

dependence upon the market process and upon the marketing nations, which can both produce new goods and induce new needs. Advertising forms but one link in this chain of dependence.

Though BOTTLE BABIES is now some six years old, the disaster continues. In January 1980, World Press Review reported the continuing malpractice of the Nestle and other milk formula manufacturers. At that time the Third World distribution of formula was a 1.5 billion dollar trade. Groups such as the Minneapolis-based Infant Formula Action Coalition (INFACT) have organized groups in 75 cities in the United States and Canada and in ten other countries. INFACT pressures manufacturers through product boycotts and develops informational programs to stem the general Third World "trend" toward bottle feeding.

Still the disaster continues. Small articles in the daily press and in such general scientific journals as Science report parallel atrocities. For example, the dumping of children's wear treated with IRIS — a carcinogenic flame retardant banned in the United States — on Third World markets. Recently an outcry was raised against the sale in Puerto Rico of rice coated with talc (a carcinogen when ingested). The major Western cigarette manufacturing companies have, in the face of declining home markets, started massive promotional campaigns in the Third World. These are but the most visible manifestations of the international market structure and financial and political relations, which promote a system of unequal exchange and dependency between the Third World countries and the metropolitan powers and between internal sectors of the Third World countries themselves.

However, Krieg's film does not provide such an analysis. Krieg locates the culprit in Nestle and declaims against its advertising campaigns, as if the problem were merely one of huckstering. The appendix by the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility (475 Riverside Drive, NY, NY 10027) declares, "Write to Congress"; sponsor shareholder resolutions; write to newspapers, show the film." The film's message is to stop the technique of profit gathering — advertising — but not the right to profits. It names names, but it does not name the process which the names take meaning from capitalist expansion. It recognizes a catalogue of wrongs, even the printer of the catalogue, yet it leaves the author unlocated.

But can Krieg do otherwise? It is not in the left-liberal political stance to go beyond appearances — whether the evidence is huckstering, dumping, or simply offering a product for sale. From the liberal point of view, it is not a social formation that is problematic, only particular individuals or firms. The film devolves around a question of good or bad practices, seeing problems in terms of moral issues, rather than a political-economic analysis.

On the other hand, BOTTLE BABIES, regardless of flaws, pressures the juggernaut. It is of value and should not be lightly passed by. Presently the film is being shown at colleges, medical, nursing and nutrition

schools, and in small theaters devoted to independent political and artistic film. INFACT and the Interfaith Council on Corporate Responsibility also sponsor screenings to help their efforts in the anti-formula campaign.

The film deserves a wide variety of forums, not only for what it says, but also for what can be developed in discussions following it. It is a powerful piece that clearly documents the situation and thus can serve as a jumping-off point to expose in a more detailed way the causes of "social murder."

Distribution:

BOTTLE BABIES (26 minutes, color). Directed by Peter Krieg, Kenya, 1975. Distributed by Unifilm, 419 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016. (212) 686-9890).

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Yılmaz Güney

Revolutionary cinema in Turkey

by Dennis Giles and Haluk Sahin

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Turkey is distinct among Third World countries in that it was never ruled by a colonial power. During the last two centuries of its existence, the Ottoman Empire was dominated by the West economically, but it never became a cultural or political colony. The political experience of the Turkish Republic is also rather distinct. In contrast to much of the Third World, multi-party democracy has become the rule — not the exception — of Turkish government since 1946, interrupted only briefly by military regimes (1960-61, 1971-73, 1980-).

The 1960s saw a rapid transformation of both the economy and social life. This was echoed by a vigorous intellectual debate concerning the directions and goals of both the economic base and the ideological formations (e.g., politics, literature, cinema) of Turkish society. The decade was dominated by a massive influx of international capital, a rapid increase in urbanization, and a political enfranchisement of the masses according to the liberal terms of the 1961 Constitution. Between 1960 and 1970, urban population increased by 5 million. Most of these migrants lived as squatters in shantytowns (*Gecekondus*) surrounding the old city centers.⁽¹⁾

During this period of economic boom, social mobility and the rise of labor unions, the ruling Justice Party and its leader Demirel attempted to represent the interests of a bourgeoisie divided between those who favored big industry — international capital — and the "numerically vast sector of petty capitalists. The latter were unorganized, politically volatile, "savage" in their pursuit of profits, and exploited the shanty towns to gain their pool of unskilled labor.⁽²⁾ Faced with the inescapable reality of rapid social change, the Turkish intelligentsia debated the strategies and tactics of "development," utilizing Marxist models (among others) to comprehend the upheaval of economic and cultural life.⁽³⁾ Both the left and the Islamic right expressed dissatisfaction with models of development imported/ imposed from the Western industrial societies, as well as with the ideologies which

accompanied Westernization. Each political and cultural wing sought to define the role of the artist in the task of reflecting and criticizing the social realities of development. How, they asked, should one speak to and for the economically marginal inhabitants of the crowded shantytowns fighting for the crumbs spilled from the central city? How could the artist express both the dilemma and the revolutionary potential of the masses while yet inspiring them to become a legitimate political force?

In the arena of cinema, the question of the ideological role of the artist was first articulated by the loosely organized National Cinema group, which effectively dominated the practice of serious Turkish film in the late 1960s/ early 1970s. In opposition to the program of National Cinema, a group of critics affiliated with the Turkish Cinematheque called for a radical cinema committed to social change. Unlike the practicing filmmakers of the National Cinema group, the members of this Revolutionary Cinema movement were at first outsiders to the industry, with no real access or control over the actual production of cinema. The conflict between these two groups extended to cinema a larger debate among intellectuals concerning the Turkish historical experience and economic structure.

Marx had pointed out that the ancient, feudal, and capitalist modes of production were basically European phenomena, that they were not necessarily applicable to non-European societies. In Asia, Marx found an ancient and enduring production, characterized by the absence of private land ownership. Although he never analyzed this Asiatic mode of production in detail, Marx suggested that in comparison with Europe, the historical process in Asia (and the Ottoman Empire) had developed along very different lines.[\(4\)](#)

The National Cinema group found its case articulated in the Asiatic mode of production thesis. It supplied them with a Marxian defense against the inroads of two centuries of Westernization into Turkish life, as well as a means to repudiate sixty years of Western cinema. The National group argued that since Turkey's past mode of production was so different from the West, its current structures were bound to be different as well. If Turkey did not go through a feudal stage, the concepts of capitalist class analysis could not be applied as a blueprint for social analysis and change. Further, since different modes of production give rise to different ideological forms, Turkish culture was inherently different from Western cultures. It had been a mistake to try to implant Western cultural institutions in the Turkish soil.

Turkish culture was different, and it had to be judged in its own terms. Turkish cinema had to go its own way. Therefore, Turkish filmmakers need not adopt Western norms of performance as their own measure of success. European models of filmmaking were no more transplantable than European models of revolution. A national Turkish cinema was to emerge through the articulation of specifically Turkish experience, not through the importation of models from either the capitalist or socialist

West. In fact, it could be argued that such a cinema had already emerged. Authentically *Turkish* films enjoyed the overwhelming support of the people. Turkish filmmakers understood the people's aspirations and spoke to them in their own language. According to the argument, their films were products of a national cinema, in part because they were financed by domestic capital, in part because this cinema was "progressive," despite the absence of overtly political themes.(5)

The Revolutionary Cinema movement took issue with both the Asian mode of production thesis and its cultural implications, arguing that it was irrelevant whether or not the Ottoman legacy could be explained in terms of feudalism. Whatever the past pattern of land ownership, a Western division of social classes had emerged in contemporary Turkey, and the current mode of production could legitimately be called capitalist. Because the observed socio-economic structure was not a peculiarly Asiatic formation, Marxist models of history *did* apply to Turkey of the 1960s. In contrast to the passive reproductive conception of film implied by the National Cinema group, the Revolutionary group saw cinema as an action upon the world — as a weapon against the status quo. The revolutionary filmmaker should accept his responsibilities as a spokesman for the rising working class, using his talents towards the goal of revolutionary social change.

The theses of Revolutionary Cinema were articulated largely in words rather than images — until an insider — the actor-director Yılmaz Güney gave his support to the movement. With *UMUT* (HOPE, 1970) Güney became, at a blow, the effective leader of the Revolutionary Cinema group, lending his prestige and box-office clout to the course. *UMUT* was hailed as the first and primary work of Revolutionary Cinema, serving as a model for future production. *UMUT* became something of a *cause celebre* when the Turkish censorship board banned it soon after release. Güney was forbidden to take the film to Cannes in 1971, but a print was nevertheless smuggled out to the Director's Fortnight screenings. It was not until 1977 that this increasingly controversial film gained widespread attention in Europe during Güney retrospectives at San Remo and the Berlin Forum of Young Cinema.(6)

Yılmaz Güney was first a star, second a filmmaker. Before the sudden appearance and disappearance of *UMUT*, Güney was already well known as a writer and political activist. But his most celebrated cultural role was that of "The Ugly King" (*Cirkin Kiral*) of the Turkish screen. In contrast to handsome matinee idols, Güney displayed a rough persona, something similar to Belmondo, John Garfield and the early Brando. Today he remains probably the most popular star of Turkish cinema, and in addition, has gained the aura of a political martyr. From prison, Güney coordinates the production activities of his followers in the Revolutionary Cinema movement, publishes political texts and screenplays. In short, he has achieved an almost mythical status in both the cinema and popular culture of Turkey.(7)

UMUT

A non-Turkish viewer may be puzzled as to why UMUT (HOPE) is celebrated as an exemplary work of revolutionary cinema. The protagonist not only lacks political consciousness, but once given the choice, he explicitly rejects participation in the incipient social movement of his fellow workers, pursuing instead a fantastic treasure promised by a Muslim priest. Indeed, UMUT could easily be viewed as a film of evasion, since it presents the story of a victim-hero. The protagonist is a confused, finally insane victim of false "hope" — who consistently avoids social or political action. Fleeing material reality, the hero seeks refuge in fantasies. When viewed side by side with the biting historical analysis of Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's THE HOUR OF THE FURNACES or the practical lesson on how the people can recover their land in Jorge Sanjinés and the Ukamau Group's THE PRINCIPAL ENEMY, this cornerstone of revolutionary Turkish cinema seems only a cautionary, pre-revolutionary tale. In a 1978 review, Variety compared the film to Vittorio DeSica's BICYCLE THIEF and John Huston's TREASURE OF THE SIERRA MADRE.⁽⁸⁾ And so we are faced with an enigma. Why is UMUT "revolutionary"? Why did the Turkish government consider it dangerous? Why did this relatively apolitical exposure of false consciousness become a strategic text in the development of new cinema in Turkey? Why consider it both destructive of the ideology of Western cinema and constructive of the possibility of militant cinema?

As a film which analyzes an apolitical consciousness while suggesting an alternative in class action, UMUT clearly departs from the recognized models of militant cinema. Provisionally, these films of revolutionary action may be divided into two general categories:

- 1) Historical reconstructions, through which today's revolutionaries can (a) re-experience the events which forged the new world and/or (b) learn from the mistakes of their fathers (Eisenstein's OCTOBER, Littin's THE PROMISED LAND)
- 2) Didactic, tactical films which demonstrate *how* a contemporary situation can be materially changed by organized political action (Ukamau's THE PRINCIPAL ENEMY).

But UMUT represents a type of political cinema which analyzes the deficiencies and contradictions of reality "before the revolution" and diagnoses the disease of the socio-economic system. The revolutionary solution may be explicitly proclaimed in an emotional call to arms (Godard's BRITISH SOUNDS), or it may be implied by the demonstration that all other options are closed. Many militant films which stress action over analysis tactically begin as diagnoses of pre-revolutionary deficiencies (THE PRINCIPAL ENEMY). And, like militant films, diagnostic cinema can deal in either present or past experience. Tomás Gutierrez Alea's THE LAST SUPPER, for example, reevaluates the relations between master and slave in a Cuban plantation to show today's Cubans why their revolution was necessary, why the old order was doomed by its own internal contradictions.

In *UMUT*, Yılmaz Güney exposes the economic conditions which drive his hero to seek a mirage. But the film deals not so much with the inequalities of the existing order as it foregrounds and criticizes the hero's attempt to escape this order. *UMUT* critiques the protagonist's desire to transcend the material conditions of life. Instead of directing his protagonist towards political action, Güney scripts the story of a mystical delusion. *UMUT* flees reality in order to show the futility of all such evasion. Only when one realizes that there is no escape, no instant transcendence, can one act concretely, politically, on reality itself.

UMUT was Yılmaz Güney's response to the socioeconomic upheaval in Turkey and the debate over the role of the artist and the intellectual. The film rejects both the cultivated optimism of socialist realism and the purist solution of militant cinema for the already militant. Instead, Güney chose to film an empathetic critique of a fictional representative of the marginal masses trapped in seductive ideological promises of escape from economic reality. In *UMUT*, Güney implies that neither cinema nor the masses can be effectively militant unless they see through the ideology which deflects their vision from material truth. Güney argues that before any political action can be organized to change the economic system, the would-be actors must abandon the idea that they possess a self profoundly different from other selves, that they pursue a destiny which is uniquely their own as individuals. Precisely because their war is waged in isolation, victims of economic exploitation can achieve little in their struggles to "beat the system" or profit by it. A swarm of discrete individuals is both politically and economically ineffective until it coalesces into a comradeship based on the recognition of common problems, common enemies. Until individuals recognize themselves as members of a class, real change in an individual's life situation will be dependent on a change in one's luck — on chance. The primary strategy of *UMUT* is to demonstrate that people who fight alone have no alternative but to place their trust in luck and magic. *UMUT* critiques pre-revolutionary reality, exposing the myth of the individual destiny to an audience who can be led to the positive choice of class action. They are invited to do this by witnessing the spectacle of a blind hero who sees no options but to follow his luck to its inevitably hopeless conclusion.

The first half of *UMUT* is an almost neo-realistic depiction of the hero's hopeless position within the social and legal world. Cabbar (played by Güney himself) has moved into the Southern Turkish city of Adana from a nearby village. He tries to support his mother, wife, and five children through his work as a carriage driver. But in the first scene of *UMUT*, passengers from a train choose every possible mode of transport except Cabbar's derelict carriage. His horses are emaciated; the city is full of motorized taxicabs. He hears rumors that the city will ban horse-drawn carriages completely because they dirty the streets. Not only is Cabbar pushed, little by little, outside the economic system (like DeSica's protagonist in *THE BICYCLE THIEF*), but as a man of marginal economic value, he is also deprived of his "rights. When a car kills his horse, the police refuse to listen to Cabbar's complaints against the

driver. When Cabbar protests, they expel him from the outpost of justice.

As his station in life declines, Cabbar places his trust in lottery tickets — the promise of instant wealth. A friend, Hasan, urges the hero to give up the lottery for "a sure thing." Hasan knows a priest who knows where a fabulous treasure is buried. They need only collect the priest, and then dig it up. Cabbar declines to participate in the project; he is still content with his lottery dreams. But when his horse is killed, Cabbar's precarious life collapses completely. Unable to attain relief from the law, he tries to borrow money from his previous bosses and landlords. They bluntly refuse his requests. Creditors close in to strip the corpse clean, claiming his carriage. In desperation, Cabbar and Hasan attempt to rob a black GI stationed at the U.S. base. But they are incompetent thieves; the GI contemptuously beats them in a one-sided fight.

Faith in supernatural "luck" remains an integral element of feudal ideologies in the Third World. Anthropologist George Foster points out that the treasure-hunt is a kind of supernatural lottery in which one places one's destiny wholly in the hands of fate:

"No one ... has actually seen treasure at first hand, but no one doubts that a number of fellow villagers have found it." [\(9\)](#)

As Cabbar gets repeatedly turned down by the secular luck of the lottery, Hasan's sacred buried treasure provides his last hope. In order to pay the visionary priest, Cabbar sells his wedding ring and his remaining possessions.

Following preparations, Cabbar, Hasan and the priest set out to recover the treasure. According to the priest, it will be buried beneath a dead tree between two bridges. They dig hole after hole, yet no treasure materializes. As Cabbar grows desperate, the priest equivocates: the treasure is slippery, will change its form to avoid capture. All nature is now converted into signs. Nothing is what it is. Every material thing is but a provisional incarnation of the immaterial treasure. Cabbar chases insects, snakes — any real thing which might embody his fantasy. Although the final image of HOPE may be rejected by an art film audience as crude symbolism, it works like the most striking images of so-called primitive popular art. [\(10\)](#) That is, it condenses previous experience into a moral at once explaining and judging the acts of the hero. This kind of image asks to be simultaneously seen, felt and thought, like the condensed scenes from the lives of the saints in medieval painting. In the most barren of landscapes, beside one of his futile holes, we see Cabbar blindfolded, turning. He spins like a whirling dervish, or a child in the game of blindman's bluff, still in search of the mystical solution — the impossible treasure. The image works as both obvious and hypnotic, coiling and abolishing the narrative line in the tight circle of madness.

Cabbar's fate offers a warning to the spectator. As in a Hitchcock film,

this film asks us to empathize with the victim-hero only to make us realize that the hero is indeed guilty, responsible for his own fate, that he had made the wrong choices. The viewer first suffers with the hero, becomes implicated in his destiny, then stands outside the film to judge him. The scene of explicit judgment is, of course, the scene where Cabbar whirls, blindfolded, in the arid, pitted landscape. Cabbar still stands as the spectator's representative, our brother, but a brother gone wrong. The viewer sees that there is no treasure, that Cabbar pursues a fantasy. The blind image comes precisely at the moment at which Güney asks the audience to take off their blindfolds, to reject the mystical solution. The moment at which Cabbar wanders most lost in illusions becomes the very moment at which his more critical brothers and sisters can begin to see and to hope.

Güney has said that he considers revolutionary cinema not as a blueprint for action, but as a guide to thinking. In *HOPE*, he tries to demystify an archaic ideology, one which helps to reproduce the material system of oppression. He attempts to *show ideology as ideology* to those who would take Cabbar's situation as the natural state of affairs. As Louis Althusser has stated, consciousness of an ideology, as ideology, is the moment in which ideology explodes, revealing the reality it had obscured. [\(11\)](#)

We might best understand Cabbar's predicament in terms of his transitionality and marginality. He is an uprooted peasant from a semi-feudal region. He was thrown into a city which is on the eve of industrialization, trying to eke out a living through a job doomed to extinction as a result of technological change. His semi-feudal past and the dominant ideology of the new capitalist class pull him in contradictory directions. Yet he remains without the class-consciousness of the urban workers. Should he believe the priest and go after the treasure? Should he place his hope in lottery tickets? Or should he join other carriage owners who are making preparations for organized resistance? This last option stays closed to Cabbar. Güney places his hero at the crossroads, in the historical sense of the word, but Cabbar sees no choices. He literally remains blind to the political road. Güney could have suddenly endowed Cabbar with political consciousness, made him the leader of the organized resistance, then led him to success or failure. But the director preferred to leave his hero blind. As Marx wrote in one of his earlier works,

"The demand that they give up the illusions concerning their condition is the demand that they give up a condition that requires illusions." [\(12\)](#)

Cabbar, by virtue of the marginality of his social location, could not meet this demand. So Güney pursues Cabbar's illusions to their bitter end. The director refuses to short-circuit the narrative by awakening his protagonist hero to a revolutionary consciousness. Güney makes Cabbar an exemplary figure in the cautionary sense of the word.

What is the role of women in *UMUT*? The film is dominated by male

protagonists: Cabbar, his friend Hasan, and the priest. But the men are shown to be fools; the priest is perhaps a charlatan, at best deluded. It would be easier (and more within the norms of Western film) for Güney to adopt Huston's strategy in *SIERRA MADRE* of filming an exclusively masculine band of free-spirited adventurers cut off from the domestic context, forming temporary alliances with equally free women who share their values. Instead, in several short scenes, the film exposes the troubled relations within a semi-feudal family undergoing marginalization, and does so in order to further condemn Cabbar's blindness.

Cabbar's family members are double victims of (1) their socio-economic position, and (2) Cabbar's delusions of the instant fix — the lottery, the treasure, and the Supernatural answer. Within the shanty that the family calls home, wife and children stand as the would-be voice of common sense. Güney clearly shows that they do not participate in Cabbar's delusions, that they literally do not see what he sees (the promise of treasure). Yet wife and children seem cowed, bullied into accepting the adult male delusion as their lot — their luck — in life. Within this traditional yet disintegrating family, there is no place for effective opposition to masculine will. Güney pointedly marks the place where sanity could reverse the progress of illusion but marks also the *if only* of the tragedy — if only the woman (and the children) were not placed *a priori* outside the realm of possible truth; if only they could intervene to convert the monologue of male delusion into dialogue; if only At this point in *UMUT*, Güney pauses to imply the alternatives, the potentialities, just as he earlier presented Cabbar, lost in his own preoccupations, blindly trudging past a workers' demonstration.

UMUT's strength is that it shows the roads *not* taken as options to the solitary path of its victim. According to the classical definition, *UMUT* is more tragedy than melodrama because the protagonist *chooses* his destiny. But it moves beyond the two bourgeois super-genres by revealing that Cabbar's enemy is both external (melodrama) and internal (tragedy). The antagonist becomes both social-economic conditions in general and the hero's refusal to turn and face the social world, opting instead for the impossible cure of secular or sacred lotteries. Yet while Cabbar refuses to institute a dialogue, or better, a dialectic between himself and his wife, family or fellow workers, Güney refuses to lose himself and his audience strictly within the narrow consciousness of the tragic or melodramatic hero. The film clearly gives alternatives; the narrative offers a dialectic to the protagonist and the spectator. If the one trapped inside the film is blind to possibilities, Güney hopes that the Other outside the screen may see the options and begin to enact them. As for the wife and children: they *see*, but their social role condemns them to silence.

Those who look for stylistic unity as a mark of film value will be disappointed by *UMUT*. Scenes dominated by a subjective camera closely identified with the protagonist veer abruptly into the seemingly objective shots of street life associated with Italian Neorealism.

Expressionist techniques and overtly pictorial photography (the cult of the beautiful image) often negate a fundamentally non-interventionist conception of cinema. Güney's later films demonstrate great technical proficiency (according to the Hollywood model of "well-made" cinema) and a unified approach to the subject. But not all display the same kind of political analysis.

The film which follows UMUT is a revenge melodrama: BABA (FATHER, 1971). A poor man (Güney) goes to prison for the crime of a wealthy man's son in return for the financial well-being of his family. Sentenced for twenty-four years, the hero is released years later only to find that the monster he protected has seduced his own wife, that his son has become a hitman for the mob, and that his daughter has become a prostitute. Vowing revenge on his wealthy antagonist, the Güney character is shot by his own son. Although a diagnostic cinema lurks in the background of the melodrama (the prison scenes, the sensitive analysis of prostitution), BABA tells a private, not a public story. Like all middle-class melodramas, it presents an affair of individuals — a victim hero against a Satanic antagonist. Although social contradictions are implicit in every confrontation between victim and villain, they are overwhelmed by an intense but restricted personal conflict. Compared to UMUT, BABA clearly stands as a commercial project. Through the well-worn conventions of melodrama, Güney denounces the buying and selling of justice while allowing his audience to dismiss the whole experience as mere entertainment — as catharsis. BABA never appeals to the spectators to examine the causes of the plot, but binds them emotionally inside it. During this stage of his career, Güney does not drive in a straight line towards a new cinema forged in the workshop of reason. He sometimes steps back to take his bearings, filming a relatively safe project which serves the institution of cinema.

In contrast to BABA, ARKADAS (THE FRIEND, 1974) constitutes the second turning point in Güney's career. It is a repudiation of the "Ugly King" star, as well as a companion piece to UMUT. Güney explained that he "wanted to destroy the Yılmaz Güney myth completely in this film." It is a process he originally began in UMUT. Yılmaz Güney no longer acted the infallible, invincible hero of his previous melodramas. Rather than the crisis drama of right vs. wrong, he wanted to film "people in the flow of life." (13) In THE FRIEND, the star's dramatic role is seductive yet ultimately destructive. ARKADAS is a critique of the malaise of Turks cut off from their cultural roots in the process of embourgeoisement. In a film that has been compared to Pasolini's TEOREMA (14), Güney acts a mysterious conscience, or alter ego, for a member of the new class who has sold out his youthful ideals. ARKADAS dramatizes the traumatic return of the repressed into a closeted, sybarite existence. Unlike the blind victim of UMUT, Güney's character here represents the insidious voice of reality, which collapses that carefully constructed fantasy life of the evasive protagonist. He portrays a catalytic figure — a dark angel whispering memories of the good world that was lost. After Güney pressures his rich friend to abandon the exclusive suburb for a brief visit to a peasant village, the businessman apparently commits suicide,

unable to bear the contradiction between his own empty life and the people's values whom he has rejected.

THE FRIEND was filmed after Güney had been released from jail, during a general amnesty, after 26 months of imprisonment. His conviction had been for "aiding and harboring terrorists." After he had only three months of freedom, the authorities forced Güney to return to prison for an 18-year sentence. He was convicted of killing a judge while shooting a new film, ENDIŞE (ANXIETY) near his hometown, Adana. Continually protesting his innocence, Yılmaz Güney is now (1981) serving the seventh year of his term on an island in the Sea of Marmara, not far from Istanbul. From prison, he continues to script and oversee films, including the acclaimed SURU (THE HERD) and DUSMAN (THE ENEMY), directed by sympathizers. He has also published novels, prison memoirs and screenplays. Behind bars, Güney remains one of the influential figures of the political left in Turkey, as well as the most influential actor/ writer/ director in Turkish cinema.

Güney looms as a mythical figure for the politically militant leftist youth and the masses sympathetic to his progressive ideals. His romantic star aura has increased, if anything, with his imprisonment. He has achieved the stature of a folk hero.⁽¹⁵⁾ Yet this hero of the romance of the left was also the first major figure of Turkish cinema to question the romantic solution offered by a singular hero acting in isolation from an economic and social class struggle. And Güney was the first to deny the validity of magical solutions to material problems. UMUT not only provided the first major work of Revolutionary Cinema in Turkey, but more importantly, it provided an example for other filmmakers' praxis. The effect of his his work is as Walter Benjamin wrote in "The Artist as Producer":

“What matters, therefore, is the exemplary character of production, which is able first to induce other producers to produce, and second to put an improved apparatus at their disposal.”⁽¹⁶⁾

Notes

1. Çağlar Keyder, "The Political Economy of Turkish Democracy", *New Left Review*, 115 (May-June 1979), p. 26.

2. Ibid.

3. A penetrating analysis of the developments and disputes within the Turkish left is in Ahmet Samim's "The Tragedy of Turkish Left," *New Left Review*, 126 (March-April 1981), pp. 60-85.

4. For information about the Asiatic mode of production, see, e.g., Shollomo Avineri, *Karl Marx on Colonialism and Modernization* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), pp.5-30.

5. The most articulate defense of the National Cinema thesis is in Halit

Refig, *Ulusal Sinema Kavgasi (The Struggle for National Cinema)* (Istanbul: Hareket Yayinlari, 1971).

[6.](#) The European reception of Güney's films up to 1976 is documented in *Dunya Basininda Yılmaz Gitney (Yılmaz Güney in The World Press)*, ed. by Turhan Gürkan (Istanbul: Güney Yayinlari, 1976).

[7.](#) Güney's career has been the subject of numerous books in Turkish, including Altan Yalçın, *Yılmaz Güney Dosyasi (The Dossier of Yılmaz Güney)* (Istanbul: Güney Yayinlari, 1977) and Mehmet Ergün, *Bir Sinemaci Ve Anlatıcı Olarak Yılmaz Güney (Yılmaz Güney as a Filmmaker and Narrator)* (Istanbul: Dogrultu Yayınevi, 1978). For an interesting account of Güney's life in prison, see Elia Kazan, "A View From a Turkish Prison," *The New York Times Magazine* (February 4, 1979).

[8.](#) *Variety* (August 2, 1978), p. 20.

[9.](#) George M. Foster, *Tzintzuntzan: Mexican Peasants in a Changing World* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), p. 151.

[10.](#) Ergün, p. 132.

[11.](#) Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 127-186.

[12.](#) *Marxist Social Thought*, ed. by Robert Freedman (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), p. 230.

[13.](#) *Yedinci Sanat* (September 1974), p. 3.

[14.](#) *Variety*, op. cit., pp. 16-17.

[15.](#) Ronald Holloway, "Güney, Folk Hero, Now in Jail," *Variety* (July 19, 1978), p. 22.

[16.](#) Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Reflections* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978), p. 233.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Interview with Lucio Lieras on *Decision to Win* "Like those who cut cane or plant corn"

by John Mraz, with Eli Bartra

from *Jump Cut*, no. 27, July 1982, pp. 37-39

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This interview was conducted by John Mraz on November 18, 1981, in Mexico City. Also present at the interview were Jorge Sanchez of Zafra, an independent film distributor, and Simon Brailowsky, whose contributions are indicated in the text. The interview was transcribed, translated, and edited by John Mraz with the assistance of Eli Bartra.

A number of films on the El Salvador struggle are now available.⁽¹⁾ Most emphasize depicting the Salvadoran people's oppression by the ruling junta and its supporting pillar, the United States government. Cameras linger over slashed throats, hacked-off fingers, and sobbing women and children. We need to understand clearly the lengths to which the U.S.-backed ruling clique is willing to go in order to retain its power, and so these films have been useful and important. But, even more, we need to understand the dialectical response to this oppression. And we need examples of it in a form more concrete than the groups of guerillas in their red kerchiefs that we see at the end of these films.

The Salvadorean film collective "Cero á la izquierda" ("Zero to the Left") graphically presents us with that dialectical response in their film, *LA DECISION DE VENCER* (THE DECISION TO WIN, 1981), the first film on that revolution made by an all-Salvadoran crew.⁽²⁾ The film presents people's daily life activities as the material substructure of the struggle. Its intimacy, lyric texture, and understatement set it apart from most other films on this war. These qualities were recognized recently when *DECISION TO WIN* received the highest awards of the Havana (Gran Premio Coral) and Leipzig (Golden Dove) film festivals.

DECISION TO WIN was filmed in the department of Morazán, in a liberated zone, during July and August, 1981. It focuses on the relationship between people's daily life activities and the war. We see people engaged in the daily tasks which allow the struggle to continue.

Men with pistols on their hips cut sugar cane. A young couple leave the church after their wedding and are cheered as they walk between lines of armed compañeros. Women make tortillas to feed the children attending the school established there. We hear people describe both their lives and commitment to the revolution. One campesino articulates, "A well-fed army is a strong army." Others animatedly discuss the resumption of a soccer game they were winning before the passing of an army helicopter forced them to suspend the game for a few minutes.

Actual combat provides but another chapter to this story. Government forces appear in the film only after a battle when army members are shown as wounded and stunned prisoners. It is a sequence lyrically structured by a silence as deafening as the sounds of war. The silence allows us to see these soldiers not as the enemy but as unfortunate pawns caught in a struggle they do not yet understand.

To focus on the structure of daily life activities in the liberated zone breaks with a whole tradition of insurrectionist cinema. The film does not emphasize the junta's — the "legal" government's — role and criticizing its legitimacy by showing the atrocities it commits against its own people. Instead, DECISION TO WIN posits the legitimacy of the liberated zones. Productive activities there contrast with the disruption caused by the invading and occupying national army. Rather than dwelling on the people's oppression, this optimistic film prefers to demonstrate concretely people's daily resistance. It does so with a clarity of expression and explanation rarely seen in documentaries on El Salvador.

In the following interview, a member of the collective and the principal cameraperson of DECISION TO WIN, Lucio Lleras, discusses making the film, the film's role in revolution, and the relation between filmmakers and people. He also talks of the collective's relationship to revolutionary organization — the FMLN(3) and its antecedent revolutionary groups. He provides important background material on the war. Lucio's vision is textured and his answers are candid. Through his candidness, his wit, and his incisive perception, he shows us a human dimension of the struggle in El Salvador. He indicates that the collective's decision to focus on daily life activities was one whose importance they perhaps only came to understand while making the film. Furthermore, he provides a perspective somewhat different than the "official" revolutionary position on the participation of women in his remarks about machismo — "the Latin American problem that isn't going to be solved by the magic art of being in a revolutionary environment." And the filmmaking itself demonstrated this problem, as Lucio admits a particular woman plays a scene "because she's pretty."

Why did you choose to focus on the daily life activities in the liberated zone?

Many of the previous films had concentrated on aspects of the

massacres, the repression, and the army, or if not on those specific things, still too focused on the armed struggle. But no film had dealt yet with what has really permitted the struggle to develop. Since productive activities had already been greatly developed in the controlled zones, we started from that idea.(4)

The Salvadoran national army takes on the appearance of an "army of occupation." Was it your intention to illustrate the legitimacy of the controlled zones by contrasting them to the national army?

The national army has been repudiated by everyone and continues to exist only because of direct U.S. aid. So it serves the function of an army of occupation, for example, like the French army served in Algeria. It's not an army defending territory against foreign aggression; it's repressing its own people. Juxtapose this to the popular army, which exists because of the food, clothing, and all the rest of the things the people provide. The film's intention is to show that this popular army exists because the people work directly for its sustenance.

Do we see a microcosm of one individual community that exists in the controlled zones or an overview of several communities in these zones?

Everything takes place in one controlled zone. The various controlled zones in El Salvador do not all have the same characteristics. This one is situated in Morazan, in the northeast of the country. The people we filmed have lived there all their lives, and they understand the nature of their undertaking. Quite simply, they've established an entire productive infrastructure — all the sugar mills, etc. They're not displaced from another area, or refugees. The refugees are in Honduras and do not produce, but they must live off the structure of international aid and institutions like the Red Cross.

This film was made by Salvadorans, whereas several others on El Salvador were made by foreigners. Do you see any differences?

Yes, in the point of view more than anything else. Foreigners generally try to highlight the most spectacular events or those with most impact, so they've fallen into filming things like dead people. Someone making tortillas, for example, doesn't seem to interest them much. However, when you see the struggle from the inside, you begin to place emphasis not as much on the combatants but on the popular base which permits them to act.

Of course, the people filmed don't react the same in front of someone who needs an interpreter as they do with a Salvadoran. This varies but they can be more natural. First you explain who you are and what you're doing, so that they're perfectly informed — but with a foreigner there's always some minimal distrust.

Whom did you make this film for?

The largest audience possible. We didn't contemplate showing it to the

people we filmed, though that would be ideal. There are no electrical generators in the controlled zone to run projectors. We were clearly thinking of mobilizing international solidarity. Political media in our movement must generate sympathy in the outside world so as to help the struggle progress. So we were thinking primarily of the foreign community and not of the national audience in an immediate way, though we want to provide valuable documents for the future.

Within the context of international opinion, we were perhaps most interested in the people of the United States — to stop U.S. aid and correct Reagan's error. We don't pretend to speak to the U.S. government. It doesn't function because you convince it. It acts in terms of its interests.

Could you talk a little about communications' role in the struggle — perhaps as the well-known "camera as gun"?

Well, I don't really agree with that. It overvalues the gun as the only weapon. In the liberated zones, someone entrusted with productive tasks is as important as a leader of a column of combatants. Even people who bear arms but who have the capacity, for example, to produce sugar, are shifted to do what they really know how to do well. The gun, a necessary tool, is not the primary one. We should differentiate each function within the revolution rather than identify them all with a gun. Filmmaking has its specific function, just like cutting cane or planting corn — each task is a weapon, a tool in the struggle. We should not associate all weapons with guns.

Do you see any contradiction between a political commitment and objectivity in a documentary film?

From the moment that you frame anything, you leave something else out. From that moment, absolute objectivity does not exist. One always takes a certain position.

It seems that there is some sort of complex relationship in documentary films between credibility and "objectivity." Do you think of the audience and what they will find credible?

When you film without wanting to fool anybody, there's no reason to ask yourself whether they're going to believe you or not. Because you film what's going on just as it's happening, and there's no manipulation. The place to make it more or less credible would be in the editing. But perhaps our primary concern there was to make the film as attractive as possible, so as not to bore the audience.

We tried to avoid any appearance of manipulation. Political documentaries are always full of declarations: "Our movement is this and this and pursues this line," etc. — something one either believes or doesn't. Such films tend to emphasize the leaders, who speak for the others, saying, "us" and "our people are doing this and this." However, the people themselves hadn't really spoken in film here until now. You

don't see any propagandistic speeches or posters or graphics — or leaders either in our film. And we used no voice-over narration, for example, because it's also manipulative to put in a voice-over narration that explains the visuals but comes from who knows where. We began with these principles: to avoid voice-over narration; to avoid materials dealing with the enemy; to avoid mixing materials for the sake of a more homogenous film. And, finally, we wanted to give the people at the base an opportunity to speak.

What were your relations like with the combatants?

The film couldn't have been made without them. The equipment we carried was in nine or ten packs, and I went with only one sound person. We slept and ate with the combatants. We had to count on them every time we moved the equipment.

(Laughingly) I'm a Salvadoran who's been in the revolutionary organization for a long time, not a foreigner who went to live some kind of African adventure. That's precisely the difference that we were talking about with respect to the foreigners who have made films on El Salvador. I think that the Swedes who went there lived a very intense adventure and felt a sense of brotherhood with the people, sharing the same needs and dangers. Because I already knew the combatants well and had already been there, for me this sense of collectivity didn't represent any unusual experience.

(Jorge Sanchez) How is it that within a military-political structure they value a film project and use resources normally destined for other tasks to help make it?

In fact, in the beginning, when we were making shorts, the organization showed slight interest and didn't see film work's real dimensions. But, to the extent that international work has been successful — for example, the French-Mexican recognition (of the FMLN-FDR) or the unanimity that exists in the Socialist International — the necessity to work outside El Salvador began to be felt. So films became a priority. International work has become a front. In fact, there is a foreign front and a national front. If international solidarity with the Salvadoran revolution didn't exist, the United States wouldn't even still be hesitating. They would have made their 200th intervention in Latin America without any problems.

(Jorge Sanchez) Will you continue making films as the revolution develops?

The revolutionary struggle will progress and present new situations to film. Films will have to be made. In El Salvador, the people are so committed to this struggle that exterminating the guerilla force would mean exterminating a good part of the population. Even the U.S. military leaders have said that there's no assurance that an armed U.S. intervention could terminate the movement.

The optimism you see in the film comes from this, that the people feel we're no longer in a position where they could defeat us quickly. The stronger we are, the more possibilities we'll have to make films. The two are directly related. Being able to make a film in Salvadorean territory is a demonstration of the power the organization now has — like having a radio operating. The radio that you see in the film scandalizes the government. They've located it precisely, but can't do anything about it, because that radio is in the center of the controlled territory where we made the film, in Morazán.(5)

Could you talk a little about the background of the collective, "Cero á la izquierda"?

We made three prior short films, all of which deal with the Salvadoran process: THE VIOLENT EVICTION, A SONG, and MORAZÁN. We've been working together for about three years.

There are only three of us. Really, we use no serious structure of production, nor division of labor either. What we follow, more or less, are the lines of the organization or, now, of the FMLN. It's a collective that depends on the FMLN, but the funds for production come from a mountain of different sectors. For this last film we counted on the collaboration of Mexican institutions: S.U.T.I.N. (Syndicated Union of Nuclear Industry Workers), the film school at U.N.A.M. (National Autonomous University of Mexico), and Zafra.

Were there material limitations in terms of cameras or film?

The limitations were what you could normally carry on your shoulder. So we had to carry light equipment and not much film. We entered with 15 rolls (Eastman Kodak Color 7245), a camera (Atun), a tape recorder (Nagra SN), a tripod, and a light.

I've heard that some of the film you used had been buried. Is this true?

A reporter who was around during an army offensive had buried some film. During such mobilizations the combatants dig holes and bury what they can't carry, such as radio equipment. They cover and disguise the holes, waiting until they control the zone again and can dig it up. Well, this way we had another 15 rolls of unexposed film.

We found the film buried, but the combatants told me that it might not work because it had been given a "summer burial." During the dry season, when they think they're going to return soon, they make a simple hole with boards and that's it. But when they think it will be a longer time, they make the hole in an "L" shape with plastics — the "winter burial." This summer burial had already been rained on, and the film cans were full of mud. The material was still good, but because of the burial some scenes turned a little blue.

(Jorge Sanchez) Thanks to Kodak packing? (laughing) The camera work appears integrated with people's attitudes. There is an intimacy

achieved. People don't act as if they're in front of a strange instrument. Can you say something about their attitude toward the camera?

Some, of course, already had contact with equipment, because people with cameras had passed through before. In our case, though, we arrived with people in the revolutionary organization from Morazan. Coming from a long march, the first thing we did was rest. And that usually took a couple of hours, while they brought us something to drink. We used that time to get acquainted and explain that we were all in the same organization. It was very important that they understand immediately that we weren't reporters — which was the first thing those who didn't know us would think we were. Later, they were always happy to see us, because there's a certain routine and boredom in war. So we always provided a sort of spectacle for the people.

The beauty of our closeness to the people could be seen, for example, in the fifteen minutes we had to wait after mounting the camera until everyone had looked through the eyepiece. Once they knew we weren't reporters or foreigners, they had no respect. They wouldn't ask anything of a reporter, or go near the camera. But from us they wanted explanations. I think this unconsciously contributed to a thawing out of the situation.

We had to explain to people who told us they wanted the camera explained to them. It's like explaining a gun they don't know — you have to explain it. Everybody has to know how to operate all the weapons, and there were an incredible number of different models. In a bit, we were explaining to every person in the line.

One thing that hits me in the film is the role of women. What is the role of women in the revolution?

In general or in the revolution? Because I don't see the distinction. Many people ask about the women's role in the revolution. Is it the same as usual? What is it going to be? There are things in which women have a special role, but in the film you see very little of them.

But in the beginning of the film a woman appears who is demonstrating the use of the M-72 rocket launcher. Why?

Because she's pretty, that's why. She was an unusually lovely girl, whom we borrowed to do a sort of gag for the film. But she wanted to know what she was going to do. Since she knew how the launcher worked, we told her to explain that. It was hard to convince her to do it because she didn't want to. She was very shy. In fact, there was no particular reason to prefer a beautiful girl to an ugly one. It wasn't a centralized decision, there was no director of the film. Sometimes we had to accept what the people said, and she was a collective decision of the people.

We weren't thinking of women's roles, and various women have said it is a film where women are almost absent. Now I see what they mean. The fact is there was no preconceived idea to promote the role of women.

But what is the woman's role in the revolution?

Well, it exists, but in a proportion that is clearly much less. You have to recognize that the proportion of women in the kitchen is much greater than the proportion of women in arms. But there are men who work at the heavy kitchen tasks for example, grinding corn. And there are women combatants, women who are in the leadership up to the level of commandant. In Morazan, I found women working in the press and propaganda apparatus, in military communications, in the health brigades, and in Radio Venceremos.

Of course, there's a Latin American problem that you're not going to solve by the magic art of being in a revolutionary environment. The structure is macho and male-dominated, and you're not going to solve that so easily. Above all, it's a traditional society, because it's agricultural and they're campesinos. In the city, well, there are many more women in the revolutionary organization because they come from the university. But in the country, the traditional attitude exists that the tasks of war are men's tasks and those of the kitchen, feminine tasks.

In the film there's a wedding that couldn't be more traditional. The priest there is successful because he carefully acts out the entire ritual. He believes in the revolution and has put in nine years with the people's organizations. There are priests who dress in civilian attire — theoretical types with no real popular roots, who seem more like engineers.

Why did you begin the film with the scene of Roger at the wedding?

He establishes immediately exactly where we are by saying, "We are celebrating this mass in a controlled zone, conquered by the FMLN." Not to prioritize the religious question. But when the revolutionary organizations began the consciousness-raising process in Morazan, many of their local members were Christians. The local revolutionary groups utilized existing Christian organizations to create revolutionary organizations.

Are there problems between the country and the city people?

Not problems, but two different situations. City people, many of them privileged, enter the revolution out of conscience — because of their ideology and education. The countryside is largely illiterate. Many enter because the army killed their brother or mother, or because they themselves have directly suffered repression. Right now the tendency is to fuse the groups because the war is mainly in the countryside. So there's a number of city people out there providing a political education for the country people: first teaching them to read and write and later explaining to them about which forces are struggling and what their relations are with foreign countries.

(Jorge Sanchez) To what extent do you think the Nicaraguan revolution has influenced the campesinos in this liberated zone? Is there an identification?

It's only a few kilometers from Nicaragua. Yes, they're very aware of what happened there. They can see that revolution is possible, and this makes everyone very optimistic. In fact, in the film you see the celebration of July 19th.[\(6\)](#)

What do you think of "revolutionary cinema"?

I think it's a label that always comes after the fact. When it comes before, it's not revolutionary. Perhaps I could say that there's a cinema of agitation that's more immediate in its objectives — that's propaganda. But to be revolutionary cinema it would have to have a much greater transcendence — and perhaps a film is revolutionary in one context and not in another. Finally, revolutionary cinema is that which helps make the revolution, independently of its own pretensions.

Notes

[1.](#) For a fine introduction to films on El Salvador, as well as a useful resource guide, see JUMP CUT, 26 (1981).

[2.](#) The original title of the film was LOS PRIMEROS FRUTOS (THE FIRST FRUITS). DECISION TO WIN is distributed in the United States by El Salvador Film and Video Projects, 799 Broadway, Suite 325, New York, NY 10003.

[3.](#) Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional.

[4.](#) Salvadoreans use the terms "controlled zones" and "liberated zones" interchangeably to indicate areas in which the revolutionary forces control the productive activities. The army can enter these areas only with great difficulty, and the fascist paramilitary organization ORDEN has been driven from these zones.

[5.](#) The radio is Radio Venceremos of the FMLN, which broadcasts two hours daily.

[6.](#) July 19, 1979, was the triumph of the Nicaraguan revolution.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

From the Ashes

by James Scully

from *Jump Cut*, no. 27, July 1982, p. 40

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"unabashed
socialist-realism propaganda"
the National Endowment for the Humanities
Chairman called it

funny, I'd thought it
"a film about Nicaragua,
about ordinary shanty town Nicaraguans
battered by waves of U.S. marines
yet sprouting up, through
the rubble of Somoza's terror,
growing in patches over the wounds
of this 20th century

still the Humanities Chairman
drew the line, "it is political
propaganda, not the humanities"

and to think I'd thought it
a TV film about a shoemaker
his wife 3 daughters
1 son

actually,
there *was* a newspaper owner
who'd opposed Somoza, and
opposed, now, the Sandinista government
from a lawn chair by his swimming pool:
easygoing, liberal, personable.

yet useless, rattled, his words lost on
the large delicate earthen
shoemaker's wife, learning
revolution from her teen-age daughter

because of them and many like them

it's true, Somoza had fled
looting the treasury
leaving Managua in ruins

And it's true
the farmers still had it tough,
there they were
right in front of us
complaining to a Sandinista official
things are no better now
than before, and the official
with a pained look saying
"we're a poor country
we can't turn around overnight it will take years
maybe 10, 20, 30 ..."
and neither official nor farmer
was content,
never mind happy,
not to have cheaper seeds

maybe that's what
the Chairman of the National Endowment
meant, saying it was
"not the humanities...?"

because the shoemaker's wife
was relieved, yet
crying because
under the revolutionary government
all 3 daughters were sent
up into the hills
among volcanos and lakes
to teach the forgotten the peasants
to read and write

she and her husband even went
by bus, looking for them
beyond even the telephone,
to make sure they were not
as rumor had it
turning against their parents

in fact the girls were homesick
and wept a little
and were proud, older, also
heavier than before

maybe that's why
the Chairman of the Humanities
attacked this for being
one-sided

because meanwhile Somoza's guardsmen
were in prison,
there, on film
complaining to the warden
(himself a former prisoner in this
prison Somoza built)
of overcrowding in the cells
because under the Sandinista government
no one was executed
nor tortured,
though early on, out of
rage, grief
and rough justice
there must have been beatings,
and guardsmen in the neighborhoods
who should have been, and were, shot

so the Chairman of the National
Endowment for the Humanities
must have felt
humiliated,
because his own agency had
without knowing it
funded this film

in it
Nicaraguan ex-guardsmen
had joined Cubans in Florida training
to invade Nicaragua
in berets stetsons mirror sunglasses

and an elderly lady
by a palm tree in Managua
was saying let them come, we're ready
they may get in but once here
they'll piss their pants

this in the film
that has undermined the
Endowment for the Humanities

was it that old lady
who did the humanities in?

I don't know, but later
the shoemaker's wife
the mother of 3 daughters
and 1 son, said
quietly half to herself
(or was it her daughter
speaking for her mother?)
before the women just had

washing cooking kids
now she said smiling
there were 'other things'
but did not elaborate
a pity she didn't, she
clearly had news for us

because now life was complex
surprising
the whole family talked together
politics ran its probing unbroken
thread through everything...
and when the oldest daughter who
was clearly the vanguard
and listened to patriotic folksongs
criticized her youngest sister
who tuned in to American rock
the youngest said, wait
you were my age once
you had your time
let me have mine

and the brother mediating
said, look
Nicaraguan music is for listening
American music is for dancing

smiling, pleased

they all smiled,
for that was that

and all this had started
one day before the revolution, when
the oldest daughter had come home from school
hiding, for the night, a Sandinista flag
and her father had said, why?
we'll all be killed
but the next day walked her back to school
he carrying the flag
because "if they catch us
it's me they'll kill, not you"

now, on top of that

the same shoemaker and his family
who still live in a shack
these sweet ingenuous people
their plump cheerful daughters
and shy son
have hit
the enemy where he hurts

that they did this, and were
so nice about it,
I mean, that it was
their decency did it,
is wonderful beyond words

because as good as the film
itself makes us feel,
this last
repercussion, which bonds
those people with us
who struck our
common enemy,
and made him pay for it

this was, is, if anything
even more
heartwarming than the film itself

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Film and feminism in Germany today, part 1 From the outside moving in

by Marc Silberman

from *Jump Cut*, no. 27, July 1982, pp. 41-42

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**Special section: Film and feminism in
Germany today, part one**

West Germany today contains a flourishing women's film culture, both in terms of feminist filmmaking and feminist film criticism. In this issue and next, we plan to present two special sections on German women and film, with interviews with filmmakers, articles on their films, and translations of feminist film criticism from Germany. Since the films under consideration are just beginning to be seen in the United States, we would welcome more articles on individual films and on German women's film culture in general, to be published in future issues of JUMP CUT.

Marc Silberman has done much to introduce these films to U.S. viewers, and it was he who initiated the idea of gathering this material for JUMP CUT. We are indebted to him for the genesis of this Special Section. The first two articles give a background on German women's filmmaking and on the German feminist movement and its relation to the left. Following are interviews with Helga Reidemeister, Jutta Brückner, and these two directors plus Christina Perincioli in a mutual conversation. There are translations of film criticism by Reidemeister, Gertrud Koch, and Helke Sander. Renny Harrigan, who has provided an illuminating comparison here between the U.S. and German feminist movements, provided much help in editing this material. — Editors

**Introduction to special section:
From the outside moving in
by Marc Silberman**

Diverse as the films may be which we reckon among the New German

Cinema, they do have one thematic characteristic in common: they focus on the outsider or on peripheral social groups. Consequently, as outsiders, women and their lives become of interest to young German directors. Indeed we find a number of films by the “new wave” star directors structured around a female protagonist (e.g., Alexander Kluge’s *PART TIME WORK OF A DOMESTIC SLAVE*, Fassbinder’s *EFFI BRIEST* and *THE MARRIAGE OF MARIA BRAUN*, Völker Schlöndorff’s *THE LOST HONOR OF KATHARINA BLUM*, to name just a few). Typical for a male-dominated culture industry, these films by men view women as objects. In fact, most fans of new wave German film, even in Germany, would be hard pressed to name a woman film director — perhaps with the exception of two filmmakers who have had some popular success, Margarethe von Trotte (*THE SECOND AWAKENING OF CHRISTA KLAGES*) and Helma Sanders-Brahms (*GERMANY PALE MOTHER*).

Do, then, no women produce films in Germany? If so, why haven't they become better known following the critical acclaim accorded to German cinema for the past several years? And what kind of women do they present in their films?

The number of women filmmakers, scriptwriters, producers and technicians grows in West Germany. Contrary to their better-known male colleagues’ preoccupation with the exotic and the allegorical, these women directors tend to make films in fictional modes. In such films, the self is clearly inserted, or they address women's immediate oppression in contemporary West German society. To some extent these films can be called women's films or feminist films. Yet such a practice quickly reveals the poverty of such labeling. On the one hand, such a label may include any film by a woman. On the other, it may limit the aesthetic question to one of pure content. Either way, the dominant male film culture and criticism have used such inadequate labels to co-opt and/or disarm the films' critical tactics. Nonetheless, here the term “feminist filmmaking” does function to point to a filmmaking practice defining itself outside the masculine mirror.

German feminism is one of the most active women's movements in Europe. It has gained access to television; engendered a spectrum of journals, a publishing house and a summer women's university in Berlin; inspired a whole group of filmmakers; and generally pushed itself into public view by means of media interventions. The conscious work of women as women has visibly increased in the area of film production. This increase results from a more broadly based feminist cultural environment, constituted as a response to general disinterest in or even hostility toward denouncing sexism.

In this context, women have invested much energy in organizing alternative means to bring films by women to the public and to encourage critical discussion about feminism and film. West Berlin, in particular, has emerged as a center for feminist film production and cinema studies. There in November 1973 the first German women's film

festival and workshop was held. Although women have not organized another festival on that scale, non-commercial cinemas and film societies have become increasingly willing to show features by women, and some have even showcased individual filmmakers or organized thematic groups of films around women's issues. Arsenal, the West Berlin cinematheque, has led this kind of programming and archival work.

An important link in distributing alternative feminist films has been the popular, autonomous "women's cinemas" in cities such as Berlin, Cologne, Hannover, Munich and Saarbrücken. Berlin's *Frauenkino* was the first — the model — until it closed recently. In 1977 a women's collective began renting a movie theatre one night a week to show films by women to women. The undertaking responded to the ways traditional movie houses excluded women by programming policies that were oriented primarily around men's entertainment and informational needs. In addition, the women's collective wanted to develop a situation not only to show films but also to discuss them, so that frequently filmmakers and technicians participated. The collective received criticism from some feminists and leftists for sexism and a separatist mentality because it excluded men from the weekly film showings and did not show films by men about women. In response, the *Frauenkino* called its programming an offensive strategy, since traditional cinemas showed an overabundance of other films, and the group said that its exclusionary policy in fact heightened men's interest in films by women.⁽¹⁾

The feminist film journal *frauen und film* (published by Rotbuch Verlag, West Berlin) represents another crucial step in establishing a milieu for feminist film culture. Founded by Helke Sander in 1974, the original goals of the journal corresponded in many ways to those of *Women and Film*, which began publication in 1972 in California. Namely, both journals sought to investigate the impact of patriarchal culture in the film medium and to critique cinematic sexism. Two other German feminist monthlies (*Emma* and *Courage*) carry on this tradition of criticism as they publish film reviews identifying the sexism in stereotypical images and demystifying explicit sexist ideology in film. *Frauen und film*, in the meantime, sees itself as a forum for women professionally involved in film production. In its seven years of publication, it has consistently probed into all areas concerning feminism and film. This is despite criticism from male traditionalists that it makes sexism into an excuse for poor quality when reviewing films by women. And it is also despite criticism from feminists that the journal is too professionally oriented and that it comes from a publishing house run by a collective composed of both men and women (see excerpts from *frauen und film* editorials). As an organ devoted to films by and for women, *frauen und film* uniquely struggles to legitimize women's subjectivity in the cultural sphere, while also trying to deal positively with the real absence of women as autonomous agents in film production.

In December, 1979, an association of women filmworkers was established in West Berlin (Verband der Filmarbeiterinnen). The organization distributed a manifesto at the Hamburg Film Festival (1979) demanding that 50% of all film subsidies go to women filmworkers and special money go toward distributing and exhibiting films by women. The association meets once a month in Berlin to formulate plans for common projects. It sponsored its first supra-regional meeting at the Berlin Film Festival in February, 1980, and has since incorporated, nationwide.

In many ways, German feminist filmmakers have more privileges than their U.S. sisters. West Germany has a well-developed system of federal and local granting agencies and prizes for independent filmmakers, as well as ten national and local public television studios with their own monies to commission shorts, documentaries and features. In the early seventies, television in particular generously funded women filmmakers. In fact, TV film production is where most feminist directors first gained recognition.

Most recently women filmmakers' situation has become more precarious. As the general interest in feminism has subsided for political and economic reasons, so has the flow of money from television sources. Consequently, talented filmmakers like Helke Sander and Ula Stöckl were not able to make films for three or four years. Moreover, films financed by TV networks are always produced under ideological constraints, even in a society like that of West Germany, which likes to pride itself on its postwar liberal cultural tolerance. Films that deal with real social processes have always been harder to get accepted.

In this respect, it should be kept in mind that West German feminist filmmaking can be distinguished both in form and content from other European production because of the close relationship of the women's movement to the student Left in its initial phase.[\(2\)](#) In other words, many feminist filmmakers come out of the Left. As a result of divergent influences, from both television and from the Left, it is possible to trace a consistent interest on the women's part in socially critical themes with a definite political tendency, and second, a dominant interest in utilizing documentary techniques.

As far as access to money from federal subsidies and prizes is concerned, women — as do all independent filmmakers — face the well-known problem of the big money going to the big names. Consequently, what is referred to here as "women's films" are for the most part low-budget productions, forcing women to adapt their style to the format of TV shorts or non-commercial features. This has hindered their developing new forms of production and escaping the circuit of television and industrial filmmaking. Furthermore, in order to stay within a limited budget, these filmmakers will often rely on professional teams recruited from friends and volunteers, thus further denying women film technicians and actors the kind of recognition and remuneration they could expect.

The seven filmmakers interviewed for JUMP CUT, and whose interviews will appear in this and the following issue, discuss the difficulties inherent in developing their own film language under these conditions of production: How can women struggle against social and sexual violence? How can they find a system of values based on equality?

Many of the directors make films that in one way or another are both documentary and fictional. This may not be a free decision on their part but rather come from the need to produce a low budget film. Thus, both out of necessity and an unwillingness to use traditional documentary and fictional techniques, these women are developing their own methods for bringing together individual experience and social insight in filmic images. Many of the "early" films by these feminists portray a strikingly morbid reality. Daily life often seems reduced to a few social relations, and the protagonists to victims. More recently their films have begun to explore other contradictions in everyday living, imagination's role in dealing with such contradictions, women's desire to intervene in their own lives, and hence, the films restructuring or recovery of women's history.

These interviews are intended to present information and to expose issues: they do not pretend to be either analytical or theoretical. Although some of the filmmakers express hesitancy about identifying with the goals or methods of the women's movement, they all emphasize their debt to the questions posed by feminists' oppositional cultural perspective. Whether their films are categorically feminist or not is a discussion that will have to be left to another different sort of presentation. For my part, as a male spectator, I found all the films I saw sometimes exciting, sometimes irritating contributions to a process of change — changes in myself and changes in the way I view films.

The interviews were conducted informally and without pre-arranged questions in June, 1979. I asked about the following things — biographical background; thematic questions about how to go beyond showing just women's oppression; aesthetic issues such as the relation between female image and female viewer or the relation between constructing alternate images and deconstructing established images of women; the filmmaker's concern with woman as spectator; and finally, the filmmaker's connection to the Left and the women's movement. Transcriptions of the discussions were edited and rearranged for publication (five of the interviews, edited by Jutta Phillips, appeared in shortened form in *Ästhetik und Kommunikation*, 37, October 1979). The filmographies which accompany the interviews are selective.⁽³⁾

Notes

^{1.} One offshoot of the *Frauenkino* in Berlin was a short-lived distributor for women's films, Chaos Film, which was forced to dissolve after only one year of business.

^{2.} For a more detailed introduction to the women's movement in West Germany, see *New German Critique*, 13, Special Feminist Issue (Winter,

1978).

[3.](#) For a more complete overview of women filmmakers in West Germany, see my annotated catalog in *Camera Obscura*, 6 (Fall, 1980) pp. 123-152; and "Cine-Feminists in West Berlin," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 5:2 (Spring, 1980), pp. 217-232.

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The German women's movement and ours

by Renny Harrigan

from *Jump Cut*, no. 27, July 1982, pp. 42-44

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Feminism in West Germany almost invites comparison with U.S. feminism in both contemporary and historical aspects. Both countries had an active women's movement in the 19th century. Both granted women's suffrage — for different reasons — in 1919. Both movements were subsumed in this century by the political exigencies of two world wars, wartime economy, and recovery, all of which led to dramatic changes in female participation in the work force. Both societies witnessed the emergence of a second women's movement during the decade of the 60s. Since both the United States and West Germany are highly industrialized countries which also form the closest political bond within an already close NATO power block, the fabric of daily life for women in both countries — particularly in the areas of production and reproduction — is quite similar. Once we have acknowledged this, however, the differences between the two countries tell us more than the similarities.

The following essay attempts to provide a general outline of the two national feminist movements from a North American viewpoint. It assumes a working knowledge of U.S. feminism and concentrates on the development of the women's movement in West Germany. The discussion is always framed within the context of what I see as the major differences between the two. U.S. feminism enlisted the sympathies of the middle class from its start. West German feminism was born within the student left. It consistently had a far greater emphasis on the need to develop its own theory than did U.S. feminism at its inception.

U.S. feminism owed its early survival and growth to several factors. It was a broad movement with a strong middle class component. In 1963, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* became a best seller, giving that sickness which knows no name a label for millions of women. At the same time, the political struggles carried on by an increasingly militant civil rights movement worked to create an atmosphere in which the concepts of freedom and democracy excited the national imagination

and carried the movement qualitatively beyond its original demands of equal rights for black people. It was here that the women who later marched with the student left in protest of United States' involvement in Vietnam began their political history.

The later 60s brought increased radicalization of left positions, including that of women on the left who found it more and more difficult to believe in their ideals when they were still relegated to making the coffee and doing secretarial work for their male leaders. Women's consciousness gradually became verbalized in the demand for autonomous and independent all-women caucuses on the left. In this impulse, which is simultaneously a refusal, radical feminism also had its roots. The great majority of U.S. women, left or middle of the road, participated in consciousness raising groups which have become the backbone of the women's movement here. Much of what at that time was private discovery quickly became part of a feminist public practice. NOW was founded in 1966 and, whatever its limitations, it provided national visibility to feminism in a vast country. NOW's very existence was of signal importance to the well-being of a movement which enlisted the sympathies of the left as well as the middle class.

In West Germany, the historical situation was quite different from the U.S. experience sketched above. The German women's movement was a reaction solely to the student left by its female members, and it lacked a broader base until fairly recently. This fact may account for the hesitation on the part of some filmmakers interviewed in JUMP CUT to label themselves and their work as feminist: Stöckl sees her work parallel to but excluded from the women's movement; Runge views the class contradiction as primary; Sander disassociates herself from the term "women's films"; and Ottinger is critical of the women's movement. The occasional ambivalence about feminism stems from varied sources, as both interviews and films show.

The German student left of the 60s was a generation of young adults who had been strongly influenced by the need for critical thinking which accompanied their nation's reevaluation of its Nazi history. Despite the avowed Allied intent to "de-nazify" the German public through reeducation, U.S. cold war paranoia during the 50s had made criticism from the left — the single historical antagonist of the Nazi regime — prohibitive. Furthermore, many of the same people remained in power in West Germany after the war. As a result, much of the criticism of Nazism was stifled. The questions asked by a generation of war babies about their parents' past had remained largely unanswered. When this generation entered the universities in the middle sixties, it had already experienced extreme generational conflict and lack of belief in authority. It was hoped that critical thinking and a belief in West Germany's commitment to democratic values would lead the 60s student generation out of its historical and psychological impasse. University students' anti-authoritarian and critical tendencies exploded in a condemnation of Western imperialism, specifically of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and of the Cold War tactics of the allies

towards East Germany and Eastern Europe.

The German student movement was as male-dominated as its U.S. counterpart. However, it had a more theoretical basis in Marxism, which was part of German national language and national history. The parties of the working class in Germany — the Social Democrats (SPD), briefly the Independent Socialists (USPD) and the Communists (KPD) — had always had a more conscious ideological basis than U.S. parties of either the right or the left. The West German women's movement was born within the anti-authoritarian and Marxist student left. This fact accounts for the emphasis of West German feminists on a theory couched in Marxist class terms rather than on an experiential, empirical approach as found in the United States. Even German feminism of the 19th century had had a much stronger theoretical basis than 19th century U.S. feminism, again I think primarily because of the closer connections between feminism and the left in Germany.⁽¹⁾ As a result, it was still more radical in 1971-72 to call oneself feminist in West Germany than it was to call oneself Marxist, which is not surprising from a radical feminist perspective.

Women's subjective and historical needs were articulated by a group of women within SOS (Socialist German Student Organization) who founded the *Aktionsrat zur Befreiung der Frau* (Action Council for the Liberation of Women) in Berlin in 1968.⁽²⁾ Helke Sander attempted to deliver their first public speech at an SOS conference in Frankfurt of that year, but her prepared statement was completed by a Frankfurt sister. The analysis here is very similar to Selma James' early evaluation of U.S. middle-class feminism:

"When those privileged [middle class] women have children ... they are thrown back into a pattern of behavior which they thought they had already overcome, thanks to their emancipation."⁽³⁾

Sander's statement describes the choice between career or domesticity as mutually exclusive — and for that reason, one

"which forces women to reevaluate the traditional middle class way of emancipation through competition and consumption."

What Sander did not say to this SOS audience was that women were also forced to reevaluate their male comrades' commitment to the emancipation of all. As a concrete method of overcoming their dilemma and of creating an alternative, the *Aktionsrat* proposed work on alternative day care centers, five of which already existed in Berlin in 1968. The statement then continues in open opposition to SOS politics, which had traditionally attempted to organize the working class:

"The attempt [by the SOS men] to make other population groups happy with our day care centers as quickly as possible may be traced back to the male refusal — now as always — to

articulate their own conflicts. At the moment we have nothing to offer the workers. We cannot take working class children into our day care centers where they will learn behavior for which they will be punished at home. The preconditions for that must first be created by the workers.”(4)

At the close of the speech, the women threw tomatoes at the presiding SOS dignitaries.

It was the attempt to create anti-authoritarian day care centers that provided the West German women's movement with its initial impetus and cohesion. In the course of the following year, four more centers were established in Berlin and an attempt was made to organize all day care workers in both private and state supported centers. Women's special needs were thus initially articulated by the female members of SOS who were mothers, clearly because the childrearing experience was still a female responsibility which decisively differentiated female needs and subjective desires from those of the males. Although mothers had a strong influence on early West German feminist strategy, that influence did not last, probably because of the insurmountable gap between the theory and the practice of that time.(5)

Overt feminist activity surfaced in Frankfurt soon after the *Aktionsrat's* debut, a phenomenon which attests to the unique role which both Berlin and Frankfurt have played as weathervanes for left and later feminist politics in all of West Germany. At Frankfurt, a group called the *Weiberrat* (Women's Council) distributed a leaflet at another SOS conference in November 1968 with the rallying cry,

"Liberate socialist eminences from their bourgeois cocks"
The slogan was accompanied by drastic graphic demonstrating how this could be done.”(6)

Women there demonstrated united female support for this rather controversial tactic, since women had already been prevented from delivering a position paper at a previous conference. (Film clips of that meeting recorded male reaction for posterity, clips which Helke Sander has spliced into her most recent film, *DER SUBJEKTIVE FAKTOR*). The women there expressed genuine anger. They had been naive enough to believe that their male comrades in SOS would accept their demands once they themselves had articulated their goals and strategies.(7) None of the women had been prepared for the sarcasm, the abuse, at best the patronizing indulgence with which the SOS men greeted their efforts. From this time on, even though the women continued to struggle within SOS, the split between women on the left and the left was definite. However, the women's movement in West Germany would wear the marks of its close connections with the student left for many years to come.

An ongoing attempt to decriminalize abortion completely, by abolishing Paragraph 218, became one of the most important issues in early West

German feminism. A conference in Düsseldorf in November 1971 finally managed to win mass support.⁽⁸⁾ All the groups working to repeal Paragraph 218 participated in it. However, this conference was the last public demonstration on this matter.

The attempt to decriminalize abortion won only half-hearted support from left women. Generally, they tended to perceive such a change as a boon for women less fortunate than themselves, rather than as a necessary precondition for their own emancipation. This position simply reflected the student and left origins of the women's movement. It also restated the Communist Party position from when it led the campaign to decriminalize abortion during the 20s. Abortion, the Party asserted, was necessary to ease the burden of working class women, but in a socialist and communist society which provided the material bases for existence, such a measure would be unnecessary. In other words, the Party stopped short of recognizing women's right to refuse pregnancy and motherhood despite its invaluable work on the campaign during the 20s.⁽⁹⁾

In the United States, feminist practice preceded the development of feminist theory: the consciousness-raising group was a way of life for almost all women of feminist persuasion. The West German women's movement to some extent became paralyzed by its search for a feminist theory, which had yet to be written. The early feminists in West Germany had to answer first of all to a male left, which provided the political context. The women's first manifestoes and statements reveal an exaggerated attempt to derive new feminist theory by plugging feminist questions into a Marxist theory, which had become fairly rigid in the hands of the German student left. Left or socialist feminism in the United States has gone through a similar process but has never been as extreme for several reasons. Leftists were only a small part of a wider feminist movement in the United States. Americans are, in comparison with Germans, hostile to theory, more eclectic and more pragmatic. U.S. feminists had the immediate practice of the consciousness raising group, which provided the context for developing a new practice, new questions and theory.

The "c.r." group, so crucial to the growth of U.S. feminism, was initially discarded as too "bourgeois" in West Germany, too individualized, too apolitical. It took a relatively longer time in West Germany for the notion of the personal as political to gain hold. (SexPol advocates during the 20s in Germany had finally been excluded from both the KPD and the SPD as objects of ridicule because of their emphasis on psychological and sexual needs). Although "c.r." groups could be found in Germany by the early 70s, they never achieved the popularity or importance they had attained in the United States. Perhaps it is the more traditionally left bias in West German feminism which accounts for the translation of consciousness-raising as *Selbsterfahrung* (self-experience). In contrast, the more general term for consciousness rising on the (male) left is, literally, "enlightenment" (*Aufklärung*). The appropriation of these terms is significant. The women's c.r. group is individualistic,

experiential, bourgeois. A male-populated group is, through its name alone, more serious, more intellectual, and more political. From within the context we are dealing with here, these labels place the women's group at distinct disadvantage, just as they perpetuate dualistic sexual stereotyping.

The ways in which German feminism and U.S. feminism dealt with the idea of wages for housework is useful to illustrate the differences between the two movements. The demand of wages for housework never really attained widespread popularity in the United States, but the reverse was true in West Germany. In both countries, wages for housework created an extremely good analysis of the type of work that women do in the home. However, U.S. women felt that they would be further isolated in the home if they had a wage to keep them there. The dominant view in West Germany was that only a wage would provide both recognition of women's work and power in a society in which money means power. (The latter position reflects, among other things, the production-oriented tendency inherited by West German feminism from traditional Marxism.)

An American who considers herself both a leftist and a feminist might long for the theoretical sophistication which the close relationship between German feminism and Marxism can create.[\(10\)](#) She would also, however, be horrified by some of its by-products. I attended a large and heated discussion in Berlin on wages for housework during the height of that movement's popularity: the summer of 1977. The presence of Selma James, theoretical spokeswoman for the "wages for housework" movement, had insured a large turnout. I was impressed by the deft use of difficult Marxist concepts, as well as by the vituperative atmosphere and the abstract nature of the issue itself.

The only apparent voice *against* the idea of wages for housework was an SPD member of the legislature, who used the contrary argument popular in the United States and confirmed it with evidence from the Hungarian program of wages for housework. In Hungary, the wage had exaggerated the sexual division of labor, making it almost impossible for women to leave the home. Also, it had allowed the state to renege on its responsibility for providing day care. Despite the evidence, and despite the impossibility of the demand in West Germany, the campaign of wages for housework monopolized the energy of the women's movement in West Germany for the better part of 1977. And paradoxically, despite feminist disavowal of the left, Marxist wage and labor theory continued to frame the entire debate.

In the United States, feminist self-help projects gave the women's movement momentum almost immediately, whereas in West Germany such projects were slow to catch on. In Germany, social security, mandatory health insurance and monthly child allowances (*Kindergeld*) provide for a more comprehensive social service system than ours. However, the German social service network also tends to stifle individual initiative. Self-help projects have in the past been regarded as

charity in West Germany. Americans, on the other hand, have long been accustomed to "taking social welfare into their own hands."[\(11\)](#) This is because our government has never assumed responsibility in theory or in practice for its citizens' social welfare. Thus, Americans have always participated readily in alternative and community projects. For the women's movement, this has meant the rapid development of a feminist subculture which in turn nurtured the growth of both feminist theory and feminist practice.

In West Germany, feminist projects slow to take root. In addition, for a time an emphasis on theoretical abstractions also threatened to stultify the women's movement completely. 1976-1977 was, I think, a crucial period in which many needed projects struggled hard to surface. The abortion campaign, which had been important earlier in the decade, remained at a low ebb after some legal reform.[\(12\)](#) As the children whose mothers had agitated for day care moved into school, that issue lost its immediacy. No new mothers moved in to take up the demand, for in the interim the women's movement had become predominantly student single and lesbian separatist.[\(13\)](#) By 1977, however, despite all the energy devoted to the wage for housework, several vital projects (and certainly more which I do not know about) survived: women's centers in most of the larger German cities; two women's health centers; public lectures on women's health in West Berlin high schools; two rape crisis lines; several homes for battered women; feminist bookstores in eleven West German cities and two in Berlin; two national feminist monthlies (*Courage*, founded in 1976; *Emma*, founded in 1977) whose circulation climbed steadily; dozens of locally published magazines and newspapers and one feminist press (*Frauenoffensive*). [\(14\)](#) The grounds for a solid communication network had been successfully laid. The first *Sommeruniversität für Frauen* (Summer University for Women) — a lengthy women's studies conference/ seminar was held in Berlin in 1976 and continued each succeeding year.[\(15\)](#)

Although German feminism maintains its theoretical tone when measured by U.S. standards, some of the change and maturity in that movement was reflected, I think, in the "Sommeruni's" topic of last year: women's daily life. Many of the sessions revolved around the idea of survival as a feminist in our society, and the topic was developed very broadly. Christina Perincioli, one of the filmmakers interviewed, gave a talk on nuclear disarmament,[\(16\)](#) an issue which dominates both left and feminist politics in West Germany today. Such a choice indicates the growing interest which the German women's movement has in moving beyond — without discarding — what have become narrowly defined as "women's issues." Today, most feminists in West Germany are not interested in the possibility of creating a women's party. But they argue for support of the newest German political party, the Greens or the Alternative List (*die Grünen*, or *AL*) because of that party's support of nuclear disarmament, ecological principles and a world free of pollution.[\(17\)](#) The decision to work in broad coalitions shows how self-evident and how secure feminism has become in West Germany during the past decade. It also indicates the sort of vision which occurs when

one group takes responsibility for moving all of humanity forward.

Notes

[1.](#) There are two separate tendencies within 19th century feminism: those seeking equal rights represented in the *Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine* and the socialists represented in the women's organizations of the Social Democrats (SPD) and later the Communists (KPD). There was also a strong radical feminist contingent within the BDF, which dominated that organization at the end of the century. Their analysis of sexual politics left little for future generations to develop. Here too we see a higher tolerance for theory in West German feminism, for historically the advocates of "New Morality" and free love were an integral part of the movement, whereas Margaret Sanger or Emma Goldman were very isolated in the United States. For information on German feminism of the 19th century see the following: Richard J. Evans, *The Feminist Movement in Germany, 1894-1933*, Sage Studies in 20th Century History 6 (London and Beverly Hills: Sage, 1976) offers a history of the BDF. Werner Thönnessen, *The Emancipation of Women: The Rise and Decline of the Women's Movement in German Social Democracy, 1863-1933* (London: Pluto, 1969) offers a history of the SPD and the women's movement. Only Marielouise Janssen-Jurreit, *Sexismus: oder die Abtreibung der Frauenfrage* (Munich: Hanser, 1976) deals at all with radical feminism.

[2.](#) The following works were consulted for my account of West German feminism: *Frauen: Frauenjahrbuch '75* (Frankfurt; Rotbuch, 1975); *Frauen: Frauenjahrbuch '75* (Munich: Frauenoffensive, 1976); *Special Feminist Issue: New German Critique* No. 13 (1978); *New German Critique* No. 14 (1979); *New German Critique* No. 15; also back issues of the German feminist monthlies, *Emma* and *Courage*. Helke Sander's film, *DER SUBJEKTIVE FAKTOR* (THE SUBJECTIVE FACTOR, 1980) also tells a history of the women's movement from the end of 1967 to the start of 1970.

[3.](#) Selma James, "The American Family: Decay and Rebirth," in Edith Altbach, ed., *From Feminism to Liberation* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman, 1976), pp. 163-98; also in *Radical America*, 4 (1970).

[4.](#) See *Frauen: Frauenjahrbuch '75* (Rotbuch), pp. 110-15 for quotes from speech.

[5.](#) Helke Sander told me this in a discussion in Berlin on July 4, 1981. She speculated simply that women with children burned out more quickly because of the multi-burden on their energies.

[6.](#) Quote and graphic from *Frauen: Frauenjahrbuch '75* (Rotbuch), pp. 16-17.

[7.](#) In conversation in Berlin, 1981, with several of the women involved at that time.

[8.](#) According to Sylvia Heyer in a review of *Brot und Rosen*, a women's health handbook published by a Berlin women's collective of the same name. She also states that support for abolishing the abortion paragraph was as much as 70% to 80% at that time. See *New German Critique* No. 13 (1978), 161.

[9.](#) The best account of the abortion campaign and the role of the KPD in it is Atina Grossmann, "Abortion and Economic Crisis: The 1931 Campaign Against §218 in Germany," *New German Critique*, No. 15 (1979).

[10.](#) See, for example, Ulrike Prokop, *Weiblicher Lebenszusammenhang* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976), an excerpt of which is printed in English in *New German Critique* No. 13. See also, Silvia Bovenschen, "Über die Frage: gibt es eine weibliche Ästhetik?" in *Ästhetik und Kommunikation* No 25 (1976), which has been translated in *New German Critique* No. 10 (1977) and *Heresies* No. 4 (1979).

[11.](#) Hilke Schlaeger, "The West German Women's Movement," *New German Critique* No. 13 (1978), 65. This and the comments about German and U.S. social systems come from her.

[12.](#) The reformed law permits abortion up to the 13th day except in the following extenuating circumstances: within the first 12 weeks if impregnation is the result of a sex crime or if it occurs as the result of a "serious emergency" (some consideration of economic hardship is admissible here); within the first 21 weeks if the health or life of the mother is endangered.

[13.](#) The *Frauen: Frauenjahrbuch '75* (Rotbuch) account of the growth of the Frankfurt *Weiberrat* mentions that the *Weiberrat* was dominated by discussion at the university and the interests of students, and that minority interest groups such as mothers were formed later (mid-seventies). Frankfurt, along with Berlin, is less student-dominated than other centers of West German left and feminist activity.

[14.](#) There is a lengthy review of feminist publications in West Germany by Miriam Frank in *New German Critique* No. 13 (1978), 181-94.

[15.](#) There will be no Sommeruni this year due to some political infighting within the women's movement as of this writing (June 1981).

[16.](#) In conversation with Perincioli at Evanston, IL, November 1980.

[17.](#) The party won enough votes to be represented in the legislature in the last election.

Interview with Helga Reidemeister The working class family

by Marc Silberman

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Filmography

Born 1940, Helga Reidemeister studied art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Berlin (1961-1965), had a daughter in 1969, did social work in a Berlin welfare housing district (1973-1974), and studied film at the German Academy for Film and Television in Berlin (1973-1977).

Articles and Interviews in *Kursbuch* (Nos. 25, 27, 37) *Wohnste sozial, hast die Qual* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1977)

1977: DER GEKAUFTE TRAUM (THE PURCHASED DREAM) 79 min., 16mm (Super-8 blowup), color, dist: Zentral Film (Hamburg). The everyday life and problems of a working class family are treated in this documentary, produced together with the Bruder family. Unskilled workers' hopeless situation reproduces itself generationally because of social discrimination that confronts them at every turn.

1979: VON WEGEN "SCHICKSAL" (THIS IS "DESTINY"?) 116 min., 16mm, b/w, dist: Basis Film (Berlin). This documentary presents a 50-year old divorced mother questioning the ideology of motherhood and family. At the same time the film observes the violence which family life can produce and reproduce.

Film Projects: Two portraits, one of Carola Bloch, wife of Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, and the other about a jet set model/ prostitute (MIT STARREM BLICK AUFS GELD/ WITH ONLY MONEY IN HER EYES).

In the late sixties most left students sought out factory work. In contrast, I decided to become involved in community grass roots organizing in the "Märkische Viertel" (a modern high rise West Berlin satellite development) where I became fascinated with my own ignorance about working class daily life.

I was suspicious about how we student leftists tried to learn about the proletariat theoretically. We read books, engaged in endless discussions and held meetings. Yet no one felt the need to go simply where workers live — the sphere of reproduction — and to develop an independent perspective about their daily misery. The only thing we did was go to factories. But even there we students made contact only where we already knew there'd be politically sympathetic skilled workers, a vanguard and visible struggle we could easily support. We completely neglected the whole sphere of reproduction both theoretically and practically.

I got to know a working class family who hated filmmakers like Willutzki and Ziewer. [Max Willutzki and Christian Ziewer are two of the most prominent exponents of the Berlin School of Workers' Films which began to emerge in the mid-sixties. In a conscious effort to revive the tradition of proletarian films of the twenties, these filmmakers produced documentaries aimed at generating discussions with workers about their problems and fictional films about working class life.] The family said,

"They are always making films about us, but never with us.
They never show us the way we really want to be shown."

These filmmakers either documented or interpreted, but always excluded the families from the production process, and, of course, from the final editing. For someone like me, a complete ignoramus, I felt safest beginning work *with* people in *their* homes. I made my first film, DER GEKAUFTE TRAUM, with the Bruder family. They wanted to film something about themselves. I got them a Super-8 camera and some other equipment to document themselves. With their first reels I tried to interest other students in my university class in the project. I coined a phrase from the May events in Paris, "Let's put the camera into the hands of the workers," to help working class families with student support learn to use simple means of production for their self-representation. For two reasons, the students didn't cooperate. First, these unskilled workers, as measured on the scale of political hubris in the student movement at that time, did not seem politically useful or revolutionary enough. Second, students found it too troublesome to get involved in workers' daily lives.

I started filming with one friend, and the family always had another camera to use as they pleased. There was never one continuous day of filming. We tried to get a feel for their daily life, getting up in the morning, in the kitchen, etc. Reduced to a primitive level, my political commentary rather clumsily showed statistics against building facades; I could find no better way to visualize a critical perspective. Furthermore, at every public institution — youth detention center, school, workplace — the film is interrupted by an X, "filming prohibited."

DER GEKAUFTE TRAUM bristles with naiveté. At every turn I had to rely on staging — it's a form of *Berufsverbot*. Those who criticized me,

including my teachers, idealistically wanted pure documentary rather than the hodge-podge I was making (see excerpt following this interview). Ever since I figured out that making pure documentary is impossible, I've realized that I can create a certain approximation of reality only if I pull back consistently within my own four walls. Thus, my most recent film, VON WEGEN SCHICKSAL, is completely impoverished in terms of presenting relations between the inner and outer world. There is nothing left of the outer world. But that resulted from the film's material conditions of production.

VON WEGEN SCHICKSAL forced me to stage psychological situations. The protagonist, Irene Rakowitz, insisted that if the film were to present only a half-truth, then it would be worthless. But to present the whole truth demands an enormous effort and, on her part, a commitment to reveal everything. She underestimated what it means to have spotlights, camera, a cameraperson, and a sound technician around all the time. She still expected the truth, but she pulled down the shades. I saw no other possibility but to provoke her, to overcome these inhibitions. I came up with a kind of mise-en-scene to build her a bridge so she could forget the whole alienating situation. Of course, I wanted to bring very particular problems to light. If you don't have that kind of interest, then you won't be forced into staging scenes.

At the end of my first film, DER GEKAUFTE TRAUM, I wanted gnawing dissatisfaction to continue among the viewers. West Germany provides no social solution for unskilled workers, and I cannot offer answers when there are none. The eldest son was able to complete his schooling in the detention center, so the film offers this consolation: both social and individual insight can be attained only through a sound education.

In contrast, the ending of VON WEGEN SCHICKSAL strikes the audience as artificial and optimistic. There are reasons why I took this risk. In the exhausting discussions with viewers, Irene Bruder heard audiences confirm her fears that an unskilled worker, a cleaning lady, had no chance, that socially she was at the bottom of the heap. Despite the fact that many people expressed their respect for her and her extraordinary achievement in bringing attention to her problems, it was for her a catastrophic experience. I knew that the film with Irene Rakowitz would have a more positive ending. Orphaned at two years of age, she was raised by adoptive parents in a petty bourgeois environment. She was able to finish the first year of *Gymnasium* schooling (approximately equivalent to finishing U.S. fifth grade) and then became an apprentice housemaid. After her marriage, she worked in a textile factory and at other odd jobs. In contrast to the Bruder children from the family of unskilled workers, who were all placed in schools for slow learners, the Rakowitz daughters all finished the first year of *Gymnasium*. They had entirely different opportunities. Moreover, I never intended to analyze Irene Rakowitz's situation like a case study. I wanted to show where her strength comes from to go on living.

During the filming I was under terrible pressure) since Irene Rakowitz constantly wanted to know what the whole film's point was. She thought it had no point at all if she saw in it only her own misery:

"If other people don't get a punch or a lift out of it, then the whole thing belongs in the trashcan."

Those were her demands, and I always try to stick very closely to the needs of those people with whom I work. Also, to analyze on film the breakdown of a family under our social circumstances demands that viewers come out with a hopeful attitude. We have to recognize that working through this kind of family life is necessary before we can emancipate ourselves. We are not living in a time that can afford defeatist films; I wanted to be constructive.

The only camerawoman that I have observed was in a film by the Senegalese director Safi Faye. Her camera strokes a person. It is unbelievable and very tender. A father and son converse, while the camera wanders down the entire body of this enormously tall man and from the feet of the son back up to the son's face. I was very touched and wondered how you could explain this kind of movement to a cameraman. When I asked Safi Faye afterwards, she said in English:

"You see, I have moved him."

And she demonstrated how she had taken hold of the cameraman like a movable tripod and moved him. Chantal Akerman's *JEANNE DIELMAN* also reveals the camera eye of a woman, in the way she sees objects and her sensitivity for the things which daily surround a woman. Women get caught up in details.

While I do not try to distinguish here between "male" and "female" forms, certain films — because of their point of view — could only have been made by women. However, that cannot be formulated into a "female aesthetic." Questions about specific male and female aesthetic forms are premature and presumptuous. Should women filmmakers continue to develop themselves and work without the political pressure of adapting to male norms, then it may be possible in ten or twenty years to reflect on what has emerged. Up to now, our films have been more or less first tries without the experience and depth of years of work. And a discussion about concepts might be fatal while there are still so many unexplored possibilities, so many experiments which must and will be attempted.

My main characters are women because in our society women have the greatest difficulty in finding a bit of happiness in their daily lives. But I wouldn't call my films "women's films," rather family films. I like to think men can equally learn from them. One-sided learning by women is useless, as far as I'm concerned. I take seriously the viewing habits of the so-called masses in order to reach them. That is public which is consistently deceived and neglected by television because their everyday problems are ignored. I don't make films for the privileged, for

intellectuals, although I don't exclude them. My main project is to make films for the people who are in them and who recognize themselves in them. Beyond that, I also make films for myself and for my friends. The themes in my most recent films — about the capacity to love, about violence, dreams, and hope — these are not questions specific to any one class. My films also attempt to work out problems which remain unsaid and repressed. They are documents of what isolates me, what makes me angry, what I want to experience so that it will change, so that it won't stay the way it is.

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On documentary filmmaking

by Helga Reidemeister

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Translated by Marc Silberman. Originally appeared as "Gegen die schöne illusion, das 'reiner' dokumentarfilm heute noch realisierbar ist ...," Frauen und Film No. 13 (October 1977), pp. 12-16.

The concept of "pure" documentary was elaborated by Klaus Wildenhahn, documentary filmmaker, theorist and teacher at the German Academy for Film and Television in Berlin. For the most part, he refers back to Jerzy Bossak, Director of the Documentary Film Studio in Warsaw. What Wildenhahn means is a method of filmmaking whereby the filmmaker waits patiently until something happens "on its own" in front of the camera. The filmmaker records this process without interference or provocation. Presumably (s)he discovers reality without distortion. Camera jolts and unfocused images are consciously included to prove that nothing was manipulated, that reality was filmed as it unfolded. Yet certain fundamental errors in this "method" tend to distort reality rather than to make it transparent. Wildenhahn and Bossak want more than to record events, although even that is questionable with their method.

Just the presence of filmmakers and their tools immediately changes reality. Unavoidably filmmakers cannot record reality "like it is." Also reality does not present itself innocently. Sometimes it is a question of political censorship. Filmmakers do not get access to everyday "realities" (workplace, schools, bureaucracies, etc.). Or if they do — through some sort of undercover investigative method — they then are faced with the TV censors. Therefore it has become more and more necessary to leave out reality or to stage it (and with the increasing pressure from the Right, it is becoming more so).

Class is an issue, too. Depending on which class we film, there are different taboos and sanctions. For example, money and sex are subject to completely different means of disguise in West Germany than in the United States. Here, "reality" is revealed through those who have nothing more to lose — that is, through the working class, in particular

through the most vulnerable members of the working class, the unskilled laborers (c.f. my films on the Bruder and Rakowitz families.)

Finally, the filmmakers' presence forces those who are being filmed into a role which responds to the filmmakers' expectations. My film work begins at the point where I am able to undermine this "role." To develop filmed object into filmed subject is a long and painful process, and it is especially risky to undertake during production. There is a creative aspect but also a danger to this situation, as one tends to overestimate the filmmaker(s)' strength and possibilities. These problems multiply when those who are filmed do not belong to an organized group (i.e. unions, grass roots organizations, etc.) and are left to themselves.

Let's assume for a moment that we had U.S. conditions in West Germany, for example, the situation of Frederick Wiseman in his film BASIC TRAINING. He obtained permission from the Army to film anything he wanted — that's unthinkable here. Yet he filmed only the surface because he didn't want to delve into the people he filmed, to search out and to analyze what they think about, dream, hope, and want. Wiseman does not even "record" as he exposes surfaces. His is not "pure" documentary. His personal choice of camera angle, image size and sequence reveals a high degree of subjectivity in his perception of reality, even though he pretends to make an "objective record."

This theoretical discussion here has had disagreeable economic consequences for us. The rude distinction between documentary and fiction film, the negation of the "staged" documentary and all its intermediate forms, has led to public granting agencies and TV networks' considering documentary film a small budget item because the "pure" documentary can be produced cheaply. After all, it seems only a matter of being there and waiting for whatever appears in front of the camera...

As far as I am concerned, any documentary that tries to capture reality analytically cannot be labeled so simplistically. The critique of my films as voyeuristic," manipulative, or staged choked off theoretical and practical discussion before it could begin. Wildenhahn has had a major influence on contemporary West German documentary, but he has squeezed it into a tight corset. The freedoms of the staged documentary — as done by Heinowsky and Scheumann in East Germany, Henry Storck in Belgium, Ivens and Loridan in France, the West German émigré Peter Nestler in Sweden, Peter Bischel in Switzerland, Santiago Alvarez in Cuba, Carlos Alvarez in Bolivia, Solanas in Argentina, Nigisa Oshima in Japan, Richard Leacock in the United States — these freedoms are discriminated against in West Germany. Their various possibilities have not been utilized.

The discussion about "pure documentary has something typically German about it, a fetish for categories which only substantiates the poverty of our documentary film history. After Flaherty such a discussion is no longer possible in the United States. And in France such questions presume the possibility of aggravating reality through staging,

through provocation. Manipulation — a clearly pejorative concept in West Germany — has had a creative dimension for Joris Ivens. Anything is possible, everything is allowed in the service of a partisan analysis of reality!

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Interview with Jutta Brückner **Recognizing collective gestures**

by Marc Silberman

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Filmography

Born 1941, Jutta Brückner studied political science, philosophy and history (Ph.D.). She has had no formal training in film, and also scripts for Völker Schlöndorff and Ula Stöckl.

1975: TUE RECHT UND SCHEUE NIEMAND (DO RIGHT AND FEAR NOBODY) 60 min., 16mm, b/w, dist: Unidoc (Munich) and Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany (Wash. D.C.). The story of Gerda Sipsenbrink is told by means of still photographs covering the years 1920 to 1975, in order to illuminate the interaction of history and biography in the life of a woman who is seen as a product of petty bourgeois upbringing.

1977: EIN GANZ UND GAR VERWAHRLOSTES MÄDCHEN. EIN TAG IM LEBEN DER RITA RISCHAK (A FULLY DEMORALIZED GIRL. ONE DAY IN THE LIFE OF RITA RISCHAK) 80 min., 16mm, b/w and color, dist: Unidoc (Munich) and Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany (Wash. D.C.). Rita Rischak presents her life as a story of victimization in her work, by her parents, by men and by her child. Both her demoralization and the forms of her revolt are determined by the social pressures on her.

1979: HUNGERJAHRE (YEARS OF HUNGER) 100 min., 35mm, b/w, dist: Basis Film (Berlin). Set in the sexually and politically restrictive fifties, the film reconstructs the memories of an adolescent girl who refuses to become a woman. She finds herself so alienated from her body and her emotions that she finally attempts suicide.

1980: LAUFENLERNEN (LEARNING TO WALK) 88 min., 16mm, color, dist: Basis Film (Berlin). A forty-year old woman begins to think about her life and her dreams after she learns that she may have cancer. Although the test turns out negative, the process of self-reflection leads to the conclusion that she has not yet lived. Radical change at her age,

however, is no easy matter.

Film Projects:

1. a half-hour essay film on Germany as part of a German-French omnibus project by six women filmmakers (LES FILLES HÉRÉDITAIRE)
2. IM BAUCH DER REVOLUTION (IN THE BELLY OF THE REVOLUTION), a feature-length continuation of YEARS OF HUNGER

I have been writing a long time, and I always find myself stumbling over the threshold of realism. When I point a camera out the window, I get a shot of the house across the way and a car. Yet if I try to describe a house or car verbally, I usually founder because the external world confuses, at times even threatens me. Film has saved me from this threshold of realism, for everything that could not be described verbally was simply in the film image. Thus, I can work with pre-given material. A disrupted relation to the external world and to objects — which emerge so clearly in every female neurosis and latently in so many women's biographies — will not be displaced through description, nor simply by filming the external world. Yet the public production of space as is found in film opens up completely new opportunities to develop what has been maimed and to release what has been repressed. Film can integrate and release women's collective neuroses and maimings differently than literature does, because film creates a public space for experience.

My films are all autobiographical. Autobiographical motivations counter the false generalizations into which we have been molded for years. These generalizations are false for men too; they simply don't realize it. We women tend to notice them more because our individuality simply cannot be contained within these generalizations. We must not just constitute images out of the small banalities of daily life. To do only that is false realism. Rather, we must find new forms to narrate private life, to recognize collective gestures in the most banal ones. For example, the way a wife hands her husband a cup of tea in the morning. To what extent does this collective gesture destroy me because it has nothing to do with me and makes me into a trained dog? I am trying to disrupt the habitual ways in which people see.

As to a particular relation between feminism and film form: woman's historical and cultural oppression does not just reveal itself not only in our familiar exclusion from the forms of exchange in a public sphere erected by men. Also it especially reveals itself in the deformation, renunciation and incapacitation of our physical integrity and perception. This has most clearly affected sexuality, but also looking. Through the look, a person establishes space relations, and without space there is no time. Space-time-looking mean something else to women than to men. In film especially, these three elements of perception come together. Moreover, film allows us women to represent our disrupted physical integrity, whereas literature restricts physical presence to the

imagination. In filmic representation, a vision of what undisrupted physical integrity might be emerges. And that vision presents itself not only to our imagination but also to our looking. Film for me offers the sole medium in which we can explore our collective labor of mourning for the cultural paralyzing of our bodies, our eyes, and our space-time relations. The goal: recuperating the means to reconstruct symbolically. This throws into question filming's own premises. Film becomes filming's content, not as the burden or joy of a tradition, within which you are confined to sitting for hours in movie theatres. It's not as "real life," the way the French New Wave formulated it. I mean recuperating our capacity to look.

This has nothing to do with a specific style. There is no one feminist style. Nor can stylistic "innovations" be introduced like exotic commodities or clothes fashions. I am talking about new questions and new points of departure.

TUE RECHT UND SCHEUE NIEMAND is a film about my mother, an historical film. I compiled photos by August Sander, from photo agencies, from history books and scrapbooks, with the intent of showing that this woman — Gerda Siepenbrink — is not a person in her own right. Rather she lives under the collective term "someone": "one should do this" or "one should do that." I did not choose photos of only Gerda Siepenbrink's family, which would have made only a fictional narrative in stills. I show a general image which a whole class devises for itself. Thus, I never come to the point of telling a story. Instead I focus on the damage caused to this woman by her class-bound upbringing. The film is done with much love.

You might wonder why I chose this specific form. August Sander's photographs first impelled me to make a film consisting of stills. If I want to depict history, I must demonstrate that people at that time had distinctive attitudes. For instance, look at this photo (a doctor with his wife in Monschau an der Eifel). Their pose expresses a very specific attitude, a certain stylization, an attempt to project an image of themselves. I feel Sander caught this petty bourgeois comportment with its unmistakable traits so well that, were I to try to reproduce it with actors who used period gestures, it would become a matter of makeup and costumes. I want to show how the individual and his/her social class mutually condition one another and how consciousness is formed. This kind of film is really only possible with documentary material. At the same time, though, it was an attempt to tell an individual person's story with very disparate material, such as pictures of families and mothers.

EIN GANZ UND GAR VERWÄHRLOSTES MADCHEN was conceived as a fictionalized documentary. A personal story is interrupted by summary statements in which the young woman accounts for her development, particularly for the four central influences in her life: her attitude toward work, toward men, toward her parents and toward her child. The woman (Rita Rischak, a personal friend of mine) plays her

own life. It is not so important here that situations from her life are staged, but rather that she lives her life precisely this way. She acts out life as she acts in the film. In her life, she acts as poorly as in the film. In this film, she invents roles just as she does her identity in life. Her role playing is interrupted, however, when she speaks her own commentaries directly into the camera, to the viewer. She addresses the viewer as "you" (with the familiar form *du*). For that reason it is a documentary film which, for long segments, resorts to forms of the fiction film.

The narrative is once more interrupted, for the entire film is in black and white except for the last five minutes in color. Here, in images modeled after advertisements, with text bubbles as in cartoons, a life is told as she would fantasize it. It is the dream of a petty bourgeois life and in each picture there is a man. Prince Charming or the Savior places life at her feet without her lifting a finger.

Nothing is offered as a counterbalance to this false utopia. I feel that its counterbalance must occur in the viewer: recognition of one's own situation. The film achieved that, even though some viewers became terribly aggressive. Many women viewers were sensitive to this young woman's inability to relate to others, to create meaningful bonds. They understood her fear of being hurt, which from the beginning led her to say, "Get lost!" That has nothing to do with social or legal conditions for emancipation, but rather with our conditioning to a certain kind of self-destruction. I show that we have to seek out the sources of these mistakes, not only in the social system (although that accounts for part of the problem), but also in what really lies in us. I show what has to be changed in us. That elicited some viewers' aggression.

I conceive of my films unmistakably for women, not for men. The men don't get off very easily. But I also don't think we are obliged to be objective at this time. I think we should first figure out exactly where we are and learn, for example, to articulate hate. Most of us can't let anger out for fear of punishment, of being denied love because of our hate. If men too find an echo of their problems in my films, naturally I would be happy.

In my films I try to bewilder, disturb, and irritate. You can have seven murders in a film, you can show someone being chopped to pieces. But just don't show a sanitary napkin as I do in HUNGERJAHRE because then everyone will feel embarrassed. No one wants to see it, so everyone forgets it, pushes it from view. "You don't have to show everything. It's enough to suggest something." No, it is not sufficient to suggest; I want to show. We are confronted with images of women everywhere: mother, rosy lovers, or deceived wives. But a large part of female reality (which this napkin only represents) is not shown. Nor is the way in which we are trained to have an alienated relation to our body, to ourselves.

In my new film HUNGERJAHRE I try to show how a girl is forced to the brink of suicide. At the beginning she is bewildered because she is no longer permitted to like what she is. Gradually it leads to a more general bewilderment, expressed by her constant eating. She tries to consume

everything, despite the title, until she is forced into silence and finally suicide.

This film is an attempt at a psychoanalytic cinematic form. The problem concerning me is the relation between the individual and society, a central issue of the women's movement that also implies the question of film content. As to the form, I try to work with newsreels and photos and with sound structures that introduce anonymous consciousness as anonymous voices. Someone remembers experiences from the past but not in the linearity of a narrative sequence. The images are disparate and uncoordinated, juxtaposed just as memory progresses by leaps and associations. I don't like to reproduce reality as if history were simply a costume party. I am trying to suggest the complexity of a whole period, of the fifties, by letting it speak for itself.

I discovered my own subjectivity by means of a long detour on a highly theoretical road through reading books about psychology, psychoanalysis, and social psychology, and, at the same time, in experiencing a deep, uncomprehended crisis. I experienced my subjectivity as alienation, as failure, as deficiency. For a long time I was unable to connect my intellectual schemes with the incomprehensibility of my lived process, although they influenced each other. The theoretical concepts helped me see more lucidly. I did not let them swallow up my lived experience but corrected them through it. Because of this personal history, I believe my understanding (not my concept!) of my own subjectivity may differ significantly from that developed by many others in the women's movement. Abstract, theoretical knowledge is very important to me. I don't consider scholarship and science a male conspiracy aimed at oppressing women.

My own subjectivity is also the result of a long cultural process. It is constituted by the history of the Western world. Women's turning point will not be found by starting at zero but by becoming conscious of this connection and emerging from unarticulated malaise. My subjectivity does not consist of negation — a position the student movement sometimes maintained. As a woman emerging from a male-dominated culture, the more I'd negate myself (as woman), the deeper I'd sink into the situation that women have known for centuries and that we, for the first time, have a chance to escape. Today negation serves men differently from women. Women cannot give up something which they have never possessed: access to a sphere of reality beyond the household. I also don't believe that my subjectivity can exhaust itself in political action. On the contrary, political action constitutes my subjectivity only insofar as it offers space to subjectivity and enters into that subjectivity. Political activities become "political" for me when they facilitate women's process of coming into subjectivity.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Jutta Brückner, Christina Perincioli,
and Helga Reidemeister

Conversing together finally

by Marc Silberman

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Each of the filmmakers was given an opportunity to revise and update the original interviews from June, 1979. In addition, the JUMP CUT editors and Marc Silberman asked them to respond to some general questions. The following conversation was conducted by Jutta Brückner, Christina Perincioli and Helga Reidemeister in response to these questions. It took place at the Tegel Airport in Berlin in April, 1981.

What do you see as the relation between your feminism and your film form, your filmmaking practice and other political concerns or activities?

Perincioli: For me film primarily serves as a means to stimulate certain things in society and in people. Therefore, I haven't made films so much to express my personal problems or to experiment with formal problems. Rather, I do so to express things that are important politically — to use a cliché. Formally I try to make my films accessible, which does not imply a bad style or careless work, as is so often the case with TV. In terms of film practice, I take certain political themes and attempt to make films about them with public subsidies. Often it doesn't work, because my themes clash with generally held social standards and public powers.

Brückner: Feminism does not necessarily lead to a particular film form, and even less are feminist politics connected to some particular feminist style. I may seem to address very personal themes. But these personal problems are frequently public problems, which we have to reconstruct on the screen as such. Feminism has been important to me, not only for my filmmaking but also to help me know who I am.

As far as my film practice is concerned, I like to work with women professionally whenever possible, but not as a precondition. The way I make films depends on a high level of professional competence. Of course, in another sense, feminism was the prerequisite for my filmmaking. It's been the essential trigger for developing self-confidence and for tackling issues which I wouldn't have dared approach without the support of the women's movement behind me. On the political level, what I do as a filmmaker is my political activity.

Perincioli: In contrast to Jutta, I prefer to work together with women, even if less professional than men. The film team's atmosphere and the support that it develops are of prime importance. Not all women can or will participate this way. But it's more likely to be so in a women's group than with individual men, who are so proud of their craftsmanship and are actually very isolated.

Reidemeister: I can't say much about feminism's relation to film form because I come from a completely different direction, from social work and working class problems. The question of feminism here still clearly has a class bias, which — at least in the early 70s — excluded working class women. Perhaps it has changed now with the battered women's centers, where working class women are involved and also find support. In any case, the feminist problematic did not pose itself when I began making films.

I did broach the question about feminism in the last scene of SCHICKSAL, when I asked Irene whether she could imagine doing something together with other women. She was very candid and clearly stated that women from her class and of her age had been excluded from feminism. Therefore she didn't see how she could participate in the feminist movement, strategically, with her economic burdens and all the kids. My situation is somewhat similar. I have a child, and I have never participated in the feminist movement. On the other hand, I could not imagine my film work without women. The women with whom I work and who have supported me all come out of the women's movement.

Have your ideas about working with women changed over the course of your filmmaking career?

Perincioli: Nothing has changed for me. The most important factor is still the group cohesion and solidarity as a creative basis from which to work.

Brückner: Something did change for me, pleasantly. I made my first three films with teams of technical personnel, whom I just happened to find. Not until my fourth film did I find two women with whom I want to continue to work collectively, not only in the production but also in the script and distribution phase. We have decided to be collectively responsible for the content and images. That new experience for me will certainly affect my films. In terms of what influenced my film practice, in the university, I only worked on theoretical problems, and practice was at first a strange thing. Theoretical and aesthetic questions are still

important to me, but women's struggle was less so. That is, unless you mean the struggle with myself, not to be underestimated, which I externalized when I began to make films.

Reidemeister: When I began to make films, I only had my friends from the Film Academy to work with. After that I was unemployed. Recently I worked with two TV teams. This experience proved to me that I have to continue to work on two separate levels, like a schizophrenic. To earn money I must work in a completely alienated atmosphere with TV teams whom I don't know. They fly in for a shoot, and they do not understand me. As we cooperate with the TV networks to get money, they deform us. We are terribly powerless and helpless in our struggle against these public institutions, but we need their money. Then I hope to make films with a group of friends, hopefully subsidized by TV networks, films that are the product of trust based on real relationships. What I don't like about this latter procedure is the fact that afterwards — as was the case with SCHICKSAL — one person, myself, was singled out as the filmmaker, as the "careerist." That was a bitter and disruptive experience, but I don't know what to do about it.

What role do formal or stylistic innovations play in your films?

Perincioli: What bothers me is that we are co-opted so quickly by institutions. You make a wonderful film, you struggle for more money, finally you move onto 35mm. Pretty soon you are thinking more about aesthetic questions than about the possibility of revealing really explosive things with the camera. I make that as a self-critique. In the end, the courage with which you started out is completely lost.

Brückner: I am involved in something very different from Tina. She is interested in contemporary issues and social problems. In contrast, my films are an attempt to reconstruct disrupted body relations, and space-time relations. Both kinds of filmmaking co-exist. Neither can lay sole claim to, or be denied, feminist status. We must recognize that these two directions coexist, and are different.

What do you see as your relation to your audience?

Brückner: I could tell you empirically about the viewers who see my films, but I don't produce my films with a particular public in mind. I make my films as I must, which has a lot to do with me and very little to do with the public. I always knew my films would probably interest women more because my themes relate to women. Also, because of quirks in our distribution system, my first films were shown to groups and organizations to which few men belong.

HUNGERJAHRE, my last film ran in the theatres. Although it treats a woman's problem, many men were moved by it, by what they saw about their own socialization and biography. Indeed, male viewers tended to overlook important differences in sex role socialization, because so much of the film seemed convincing to them. But I didn't make the film with either women viewers or mixed audiences in mind. I am confronted

with audience reactions only after the film is completed.

Perincioli: My case is reversed. My public is very important to me, especially that they laugh and cry and express their emotions. In earlier film discussions, many people — especially men — would try to ask very cunning questions or would argue with each other or discuss politics in order to make themselves look important. The discussions after *DIE MACHT DER MÄNNER*, however, were different because the audience felt the need to express their solidarity and warmth.

I am just beginning to work on a play about Three Mile Island and want to take up more general questions, not specifically women's issues. For example, why have men built the world with such destructive potential? Why might women perhaps do it differently? I want to engage the audience directly, this time without the film's tricks but with the physical presence of actors and spectators in a common space.

I don't want to film again in the style of *DIE MACHT DER MÄNNER*: realism according to TV norms. Perhaps I will return to film with new experiences from the theatre. I want to get away from dramatic stories that use such long detours to stimulate something in the mind or the soul. I am looking for a more direct route.

Reidemeister: The audience is also very important to me. But I have learned through my recent travels in the United States and France that I cannot rely only on the feedback of the German audience. Here I was really criticized for my films. They tended to split the audience into diametrically opposed groups. In France, though, taboos against expressing family problems and women's aggression do not seem so strong. The French understood *SCHICKSAL* correctly, in its context of the damage and wounds a fascist past has inflicted upon the German family. Unfortunately the German public didn't, and I find little encouragement to continue presenting problematic issues.

What forms of censorship have you confronted?

Brückner: Recently I was asked to make a film in a series about women's midlife crisis. The producer and TV editor — both men — had their own ideas about how a film about a woman, written and directed by a woman, should look. Their interference began with the script and became ever worse. You face such censorship in almost all productions that institutions commission. There's censorship of how one approaches the theme, of the dramatic structure which — by conventional norms — must not be "boring." Generally, there's a narrowing of topics, because the private sphere is to remain private. In my case the problem became acute in a male masturbation sequence. Everyone expected, naturally, that the camera would show a painfully distorted face and only suggest something happening below. That wasn't my idea, though, and everyone was shocked. The sequence was edited out as not "psychologically convincing" (in other words, a German man doesn't masturbate). That was brute censorship, dictated by the program director's standards of taste. Moreover, the TV network took the unusual step of forbidding me

to make changes of any kind, even keeping me from preparing a completed copy even at my own cost for festivals that had requested the film.

Reidemeister: Here are some of my problems getting my Carola Bloch project accepted [Carola Bloch is a long-time Jewish political activist who joined the German Communist Party in 1932 and after the War belonged to the East German Socialist Party until 1956 when she was expelled]. After rejection slips from nine different TV studios, I finally received one quarter the budgeted amount. The problem is Carola's past as a CP member, something I can't and don't want to conceal. I am supposed to make a 30-minute TV version, which will of course be censored. I am now looking for additional money so that I can prepare an uncensored feature-length version.

Perincioli: A lot of my projects weren't accepted because they weren't currently fashionable. For instance, in 1973 I wanted to make a film about witches. TV producers considered it ridiculous, although today they will accept virtually anything on that topic. Recently, for my Three Mile Island film project, I wrote to fourteen German and foreign TV studios, studios which knew me or had purchased my earlier films. Two responded affirmatively, but their offers then evaporated. Of course, in the United States it is even worse. As I understand it, there is no coverage at all of such issues.

I have also had my scripts completely rewritten, and then filmed so I didn't recognize them. That is even worse than censorship. In another instance, I was fired as director for my own script ANNA UND EDITH because the TV network thought I was too partisan and that a man could deal better with a lesbian relationship.

Reidemeister: It is becoming increasingly difficult to pry money out of the networks. And our money, of course, is always tied to the magical incantation, "low budget." I have been advised by one of the more progressive TV editors that I should work with video because it is cheaper and fashionable. That, too, for me is a form of censorship. All the faucets are being turned off.

What does the term "women's films" mean to you?

Brückner: It points to a kind of film which proves that women are much more sensitive than even they themselves had imagined. My position is miles away from that. The notion as presently used is very harmful, and I would suggest that we abandon it.

Reidemeister: We are stuck in such narrow categories. The concept "women's films" serves only to discriminate against all of us.

Perincioli: We've struggled so long to be able to make films about women's issues. Now we have done that for a while. We women are becoming interested in issues such as nuclear power and the military. Helke Sander and I have found, however, that TV producers will not

accept our script suggestions on these "male" themes. It will take a long time to overcome that prejudice.

Brückner: The notion of "women's films" also serves to mainstream women's position as a "minority." When their films belong only to the alternative cinema, it becomes a convenient way to repress the fact that women constitute half of the world's population. Our problems are not minority problems.

Perincioli: I would keep the concept, "women's films," if we could really call all the rest "men's films." Men's films are not just made by men. But they also are situated in a completely different social framework, and they represent society as if we didn't exist.

Brückner: Furthermore, the best "women's films" are generally considered to have been made by men. Much better than anything we women could ever make!

Do you have any comments on the U.S. response to your films?

Reidemeister: We women filmmakers from West Berlin, who visited California in November (1980) as part of the Berlin-Los Angeles cultural exchange, were frequently criticized for making "aggressive" films. "Why are you all so grim?" Perhaps viewers assumed we women should produce "soft" films, and became upset to find us depicting certain problems with great vehemence.

Brückner: The same questions came up in France when I was at the Festival of Sceaux. Rather than a critique, I see that as a kind of shock reaction, respectful shock. We debated why German women approach personal and social contradictions with such vehemence, whereas the French either remain on the surface, in the worst cases, or enter the imaginative sphere. I'm not sure whether this holds true in the United States. However, in our postwar generation, we had no other possibility than to confront our history and that of our parents, i.e., our autobiographies. That our films are so grim has a lot to do with German history.

Perincioli: Being Swiss, I can observe this phenomenon as an outsider. I do find Germans somewhat "grim." They do everything so seriously and with such profundity. In other cultures, perhaps with the French, the same precision prevails but with a laugh now and then.

Unlike in other countries, German women have had many more opportunities to make films in the last five years, and they have produced a tremendous quantity. After the Los Angeles Program last November, I was able to attend the "Feminar" at Northwestern University. I saw several shorts one evening and was impressed how these women were trying — with almost no money — to make films, even if only three or ten minutes long. Under those conditions you can't expect a women's film culture to blossom. Perhaps that is a false impression, but I did hear how difficult it is to fund any kind of

reasonable project.

Actually, I too would like to know why things developed the way they did in Germany. Part of the answer relates to German TV. It is different from all other European systems. It has more money and it is decentralized. Most important probably is the fact that so much money is circulating in West Germany. Even an outsider gets a chance to do something. Should the economy slow down, we will certainly feel the effects quickly.

Brückner: We women were also in a position where at a certain point we could begin to profit from a system that men had built up for themselves. Our situation is typified by the Autorenfilm (auteur film), where individual filmmakers have control over all phases of production), and the TV subsidy system responds to it. That is an important factor, especially when you compare internationally recognized film cultures like those in France and Italy. There, too, you find a strong women's movement. Yet the women hardly have access to the film industry, even though that industry is stagnating. Because an auteur's control doesn't exist in these other countries, a woman can rarely become a filmmaker in the classical industrial system. Those women are faced with even stricter censorship than we know.

Perincioli: You know, after we've heard what each has to say in response to the questions, we should begin a second discussion about what we have said. We are really grateful that this "interview" has forced us finally to talk with each other. We've never done it before.

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Feminism and film

by Helke Sander

translated by Ramona Curry

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"I like chaos, but I don't know whether chaos likes me."
— Bob Dylan

(This essay is a paper given in Graz, Austria, in November, 1977, on the occasion of the annual fall literature and theater festival there — the so-called "Steirischer Herbst — on the topic, "Is there and what is feminine imagery?"')

After thinking about it for a long time, I have come to doubt whether this question makes any sense. But it is so frequently used, along with its variations about the forms of feminine aesthetics and feminine creativity, that it has come to belong to the repertory of many festivals, seminars and symposia. The very peculiar conclusions arrived at these conferences have also begun to work their way into professional terminology, where they tend to confuse rather than clarify concepts as well as to distract attention away from other more pressing questions.

In posing the question, people often make no distinction between feminine or feminist imagery. They use the words interchangeably, even though one word is a biological and psychological term and the other a political one.

As for feminism, the most contradictory and utterly irreconcilable definitions of the term are represented among women's groups that call themselves feminist, whose only common denominator is that they see all women oppressed by patriarchal power structures. But in defining causes, political consequences and relation to other theories about society, opinions diverge so widely — thus far we have not been able to use an exact terminology or refer to a single predominating position

which might have set definitions of these terms.

And there has not yet been a feminist art manifesto of the sort that either directly or indirectly political movements bring about, as for example the manifesto of Russian artists shortly after the revolution or of the many European artists groups in the 20s.

But perhaps the initial question also implies that through the feminist movement, certain as yet unrealized feminine qualities — that is, characteristics which have been socially smothered in men, such as sensitivity, fantasy — can be expressed with confidence first in art works by women.

The question about feminine imagery cannot even begin to be answered due to the lack of film-producing women. And it would break all rules of statistics to force a deduction about aesthetic similarities from the 100 films women have produced at different times, in different cultures and countries, about the most varied topics and most diverse genres. Such an effort might be worthwhile if there were anything approaching equal participation of the sexes in the arts. But I doubt then if this question would still interest us.

In addition, we should consider that until very recently femininity was always defined by others, by men. Only now have women begun to comprehend themselves as social subjects and to throw off alien interpretations of their nature and being. The organized expression of these efforts is the women's movement. From all sides and with dissimilar results and battles, these organizations are feeling out the question of what women want, more than the question of what women are.

Women have just begun to dare to see themselves and others, society, with their own eyes. They are beginning to compare alien opinions and theories to their own experiences. They are formulating first concepts, with the help of which we can begin to comprehend the nature of past feminine oppression, today's social contradictions, and our expectations for a different human future.

And in every woman's behavior toward herself and in others' toward women — in laws, traditions, and work regulations — nowadays we always find both images: woman as object and as subject. Therefore, both — the traditional and conditioned, and the politically new — will be present in work by women, including that of contemporary women filmmakers. It is yet to be seen whether women, when first given a chance to do whatever they want, will explode in never-before-seen forms, content and techniques. It will then result from entirely different social conditions.

The visual arts at least tend to answer this question about feminine imagery with "Yes." Women's preferences for certain genres, materials and forms also seem to express particularly feminine aesthetic concepts. Something like this also floats around in the women's movement.

However, it has also been adequately recognized in the meantime that women have usually painted still lifes and portraits because they were forbidden to make studies of nudes, to say nothing of the barriers to sculpture.

Such an approach in film aesthetics is by its very nature senseless because we are dealing with standardized materials and equipment. But that does not prevent similar theses from being proposed in the area of film, claiming that women prefer, out of feminist conviction, video, documentary film, and semiprofessional work in groups with other women. Every such argument has economic causes, but this is totally ignored. If one wants to work with film, video becomes a cheaper compromise, documentary films are usually cheaper than features. And the fact that some women filmmakers call on their women friends to help on sound, directing and in other capacities stems from pure need.

So if for all the above-mentioned reasons, we cannot speak of feminine imagery. The women who film or paint, etc., interest themselves less in the question of whether their products are feminine, but rather in whether their products are authentic. The penetration of the women's movement into the arts has made it possible for the first time, systematically, to recognize patriarchal ideologies in art works, that is to say, mostly male art works. The absence of certain sexist stereotypes, which we could find throughout film history in films by women, does not yet constitute a feminine imagery, but rather at the very most leads to attention to sensitivity for image-predominant ideologies.

Until now, with a few exceptions in the silent film era, film has been purely a male domain. As such a widely distributed and immediate means of communication, it has also shaped women's images of themselves, their roles, their ideals and standards of beauty. Women in film were for a long time the artistic creations of those who made the images.

We can perhaps measure the meaning of this indoctrination through false images if we consider that only about two percent of the population reads literature, and literary production has always been less standardized than film production. But nearly everyone shares in film culture through movies and today through television. Although the participation of women working in these media has grown in recent years, women still make up just a fraction of the whole and are almost never involved in decision-making.

The women's movement in the arts now reveals the masculinity mania in art. The movement is freeing the image of women from a "natural feminine state" and from an assumed natural relation to men visually as well. A very simple example of this is that in film even more than in reality, women are expected to be shorter than men. For example, no serious romances could ever occur between partners of the same height, much less between tall women and short men. If this happens, it is always only comical and means that the man in such a relationship is not to be taken seriously. It is new that such a relationship today can be

treated with irony, as in that TV news report showing a visit to Mao by Kissinger with his wife Nancy — a head taller than Henry. Mao, giggling, pointed repeatedly at Mrs. Kissinger while looking at Kissinger, as if Mao were bringing a good joke into politics. The newscaster announced this news item with a slight smile.

In recent years, many Hollywood actresses have complained that scripts are no longer being written in which women even appear. We at frauen und film have suggested that this could be perhaps unconsciously a correct and honest reaction to the women's movement. If one has nothing to say, one should remain silent; it is only in keeping with principles that women's roles get eliminated altogether.

I hope I have made clear thus far that the denial of feminine imagery does not mean that art does not vary according to sex, any less than it varies according to class, as socialist theory has analyzed. I do not mean by this that these aspects and others — national characteristics, for example — add up to determine a work of art. Rather, they enter into the formal experience that only an artwork makes accessible.

But just as a progressive social theory has led to a dogmatic aesthetic, that is, the equation of social realism with a thesis about knowledge (about how we experience the forms of knowledge), feminism has also had the tendency to make certain aesthetic categories a measure of the aesthetic experience. Thus spontaneity, in women, is no so much oppressed but rather socially patronized. It has been sharply ideologized, and the form into which this spontaneity flows has been summarily declared to be art. This phenomenon is like the fact that science's being antipathetic to women has led to women's groups' showing an antipathy to theory.

In a turnabout, social deficits are simply idealized and declared artistic victories. From such tendencies within the women's movement itself then, definitions can be arrived at which always see women and their works only partially and not in terms of our whole living condition.

But underlying those sometimes so emphatically expressed women's demands for collectivity and spontaneity is also the wish to abolish the dichotomy which makes some responsible for the production of goods and the others responsible for the arts. At the base lies the wish that it be the fundamental right of every person to work out their experiences in every direction. In the realization of this demand, with all the catastrophes and horrors it brings, lies a piece of utopia. There is only rarely, very rarely, a lucky case when the joint work of non-professionals results in outstanding productions.

I have already implied that women today find themselves in a situation perhaps best compared to that of Kaspar Hauser or the Wild Child. We must first learn to see with our own eyes and not through the mediation of others. And when we have just first begun to talk, we still stutter and write no poetry. This leads feminist artists into conflicts for which there are no solutions and which affect them qualitatively totally differently

than male artists.

The women's movement is striving to examine our fragmented history from the point of view of women's interests. So far there has been virtually no division of labor at this, only gargantuan efforts to gather individual insights piece by piece. The questions touch everyone existentially. The forms of confronting issues require again and again that we abandon our own line of work. We have to choose between things of immediate importance to the movement and the requirements of our own work, which is in many ways, however, also based on the entire movement's insights. We are not only building a house, but simultaneously gathering and assembling the materials for it ourselves.

Women artists have worked not only on art but on the movement's pressing problems. They do both always in the hope of soon making their presence there rather superfluous in order to be able to concentrate again fully on developing their own talents. Almost all the women's movements' projects with which we have meanwhile become acquainted are unpaid. They have arisen from this inner contradiction, such as the first women's film festival organized by women filmmakers to familiarize themselves with otherwise inaccessible knowledge; the art exhibitions; the journal *frauen und film*, for work on which even today no one makes a penny.

Many film projects have also arisen in order to contribute to social campaigns, for example around Paragraph 218 (the Federal law restricting abortions — trans. note), contraceptives, etc. Such work is all born of the desire to support the women's movement in such a way as to have an immediate effect. But this often distracts from women artists' own projects, which are more complicated and stand in a much less direct relation to the movements. The pressure of making many such works without financial support, and often with untrained people, quickly leads to unbearable conflicts with the women filmmakers' own standards of excellence. Later, such films are frequently used in an official context against the filmmakers when they are applying for money.

Furthermore, the art and film market will scarcely allow even a temporary absence. Artists must rigorously pursue their own interests or else be lost. It means being torn back and forth between the women's movement and its demands and its advances on the one hand, and the conditions of artistic work on the other. This contradiction leads to nearly insoluble internal and external problems, which necessarily become apparent in our work. Besides, the competition in the freelance world is murderous. This system again makes women filmmakers themselves into competitors. This is because in comparison to their male colleagues they receive fewer commissions to begin with and do not yet have a lobby of any sort.

Beyond this, many of the qualities which are encouraged in and through the women's movement, such as eliminating hierarchical behavior and irrational authority, and recognizing and paying attention to underrated

abilities, are in actual work situations likely to result in catastrophe. Filmmaking conditions are so intertwined with the laws of the market, that humane behavior at work is often interpreted as feminine weakness. Consider too that normal professional work teams derive from labor traditions which fully accept capitalist values.

In short, wherever women land, within a very short time there is nothing but confusion, shock, excitement.

If we also consider that many women, in keeping with their principles, propose to make films on subjects which have arisen from a movement which the ruling powers ignore or fight, then we can get a pretty good picture of what happens before productions, that is, where decisions about financial means are made. Examples of this are almost all of the works which came out of the campaigns against Paragraph 218. Because the political demands of the women's movement could not, in fact, really be theoretically grounded within the public media, this resulted in the semi-professional works which I have already mentioned, often formally quite lacking. These works born of necessity have lead, as I said, to definitions about feminist film and the sort of conclusion that feminist film is presumably "primarily interested in the documentary and mistrusts the power of fantasy."

Still other aesthetic points of friction have arisen in these confrontations. Quite materialistically and simply, the women's movement has begun with itself, with the female body, thereby exposing injustices and alien definitions. Now in many of these films, nude bodies and sexual organs play a role. These are filmed not to awaken erotic feelings in men nor to be sexually neutral or medically functional, but rather to picture the female body so as to lead women into the blank regions of unexplored subjectivity.

Because a female sex organ is immediately associated with pornography and thus banned from all public media, we can imagine the collisions between themes of this kind with public broadcasting stations. The stations follow general guidelines, which clearly forbid showing anything which violates customary moral feeling or which in principle challenges marriage and family. This challenge, however, forms a basis of the entire women's movement. On the international scale, this chapter of women's seeing their bodies with their own eyes is far from having been written to the end. It will become explosive anew when contributed to by our Arab sisters, who must struggle to win not only the filmic right to their own bellies but also even the right to their own unveiled faces. Not long ago a newspaper article mentioned the Turkish censor had forbidden showing love scenes or women in bathing suits in films.

When we perceive our own interests, we do not express that only in tearing down ruling ideologies, but really concretely in confrontations at the work place, now among women filmmakers in the arts industry. Stated otherwise: women's most authentic act today — in all areas including the arts — consists not in standardizing and harmonizing the

means, but rather in destroying them. Where women are true, they break things.

With visual material, this "breakage" has been the most progressive in analyses, and the most diffuse in practice. It often makes productions disjointed and inconsistent, especially with women artists who have just begun to work, those not trained in and then building on an art tradition before joining the women's movement and then consciously distancing themselves formally from this tradition.

Of course, we also should not forget that there are women filmmakers and artists who because of personal distance from the women's movement remain altogether untouched by these problems and can for this reason often work much more effectively. Unburdened by politics, they can get commissions and sit on certainty instead of on chaos. In contrast, feminist artists can say with Bob Dylan: "I like chaos, but I don't know whether chaos likes me."

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Why women go to the movies

by Gertrud Koch

translated by Marc Silberman

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Not only for women — but for them in particular — going to the movies today still represents a leisure time activity that is not held in very high social regard. Women who go to the movies regularly, or even occasionally, report that it is subject to a sort of prohibition. It is something that women just don't do. Yet curiously enough, this prohibition is directed, in its aggravated form, primarily towards women who go to the movies alone. Should they go with a male companion, then the movies become socially acceptable. Compared to traditional sanctions against women which prevent them from seeking out public places (bars, streets, stations), the mechanism prohibiting women from going to the movies seems to suggest something more. It goes beyond protection of the private property "woman" from voyeuristic stares or even from her own attempts at making contact, which would disrupt the male monopoly. In this instance the woman is removed from the voyeurism of other men. In contrast, in the case of the latent movie prohibition, the woman is denied her own voyeurism. What is improper in going to the movies corresponds to that repressed, preconscious perversion which patriarchal society allows itself at the movies.

Voyeurism as a stage of early childhood sexuality does not appear only among boys; it also leaves its traces in female socialization. At the same time, it is obvious that voyeurism — as with most female erotic sensations connected to the more aggressive components of touch — became a taboo for women. Social history demonstrates that basically women were desired as objects of male voyeurism, but that they themselves had to conceal their desirability behind veils, screens, and complex makeup rituals. In the eyes of men, they saw only themselves.

Certainly that helped pin women down to the narcissistic components in their history of socialization. The more importunate male gaze flings back voyeurism and is recorded in the exhibitionism of the narcissistic woman. Before she can challenge the men — even if only through stares — she is subordinated by the power of the dominating gaze. She may choose a chaste look at the ground (the evacuation of expression, denial, in order to elude the aggression of stares), or she may choose a mask superimposed on the gaze.

One of the most irritating shots in film history draws its ambiguity from the disruption of the taboo against the female stare. In *SUMMER WITH MONIKA* (Ingmar Bergman, 1952) there is a long static shot in which Harriett Andersson looks directly into the camera. Projected onto the screen, she is staring out at the viewer. Because her gaze is not focused on some imaginary distant point, she appears to be looking directly into the viewer's eyes. This shot was perceived at that time as enormously irritating, and even today it retains much of its suggestive power. Harriett Andersson's infinitely sad, somewhat disparaging stare contains the rupture of female sight, which is denied in-sight into the world. Simultaneously the stare gives off a definite erotic fascination, which is developed in the context of the role of a working-class vamp. The "lost" gaze corresponds to the disruption of the taboo against staring: if someone dares to stare, there is no one left to respond freely. In this one shot alone, the central theme of the film — the unhappiness of love — is mirrored in its entirety. The autonomous, free-staring woman will find no one who can stand her gaze, no one who will not attempt to interrupt and subordinate her sight.

The vamp represents one of the few female images that is allowed to look at men freely. Mae West couples her disparaging meat-tester's gaze directly with carnal motives: after a few knowledgeable glances she taps the men on their rear ends. In contrast to this is Marilyn Monroe's constantly veiled stare. In *HOW TO MARRY A MILLIONAIRE* (J. Negulesco, 1953) she is extremely nearsighted so that she hardly sees anything. Under these conditions she can move about in a provokingly narcissistic way without bothering about male stares. Schneider and Laermann trace the same phenomenon in the social history of the "bella donna" gaze:

"Drops of Atropin on the eyes expanded the pupil and created the illusion of an emotional state in which the eyes expand automatically, i.e., erotic excitement. But the chemical produced an effect which was as blinding as it was sexy The woman could no longer see. Her disrupted vision could no longer intercept the radiance it emitted."[\(1\)](#)

Why, then, do women go to the movies? Why do they go to movies which primarily show films in which women offer themselves to the voyeurism of men? I find it too limiting to see here nothing more than a kind of identification with the male aggressor in order to explain how the tyranny of the male stare becomes a generalized principle to which

the woman is subordinated. For a time the gaze of men and women is congruent, because their socialization proceeds together as long as both are centered on the mother as love object. Voyeurism is anchored in early childhood. That's a time when sex role identity is still undefined in the child's consciousness, a time when the child believes it can change sex as it pleases, a time when sex role identity has not yet been perceived as a fact of nature. Early childhood sexuality offers a point of departure for the view, which not only men but also women can activate, an infantile voyeurism that is woman-centered, rather than being fixated on an object relation only with the opposite sex. Thus, male anxiety about female voyeurism certainly goes further than fear of women's appraising gazes at male competition. Indeed it also contains the fear that the female bisexual component can make women into competitors in the object realm reserved for men. The open jealousy of men directed toward the pleasures which women derive from their voyeurism in dressing each other and combing and painting each other has its roots here.

In this context it becomes meaningful to investigate the preferences of women filmgoers for particular stars. For example, the success and popularity of Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo among women may have something to do with their glamorous bisexuality. And this might similarly explain why men do not always completely share this pleasure in response to the stereotypes embodied by the two stars.

Many female stars — from Asta Nielsen to Lieselotte Pulver — have at one time or another played a tomboy role. However, few have embodied an androgynous or transvestite image. Often the tomboy role was no more than a dramatic accessory, completely external to the figures themselves. Some of the most impressive examples of aesthetic mystification of sex identity (in film history) can be found in many of Marlene Dietrich's roles, most directly in *BLONDE VENUS*. (Josef von Sternberg, 1932). Here the androgynous mask and the mother role are coupled in a particularly interesting manner so that the viewer is offered a direct identification set within the child's role. Dietrich's transformation from a show star dressed in a tuxedo to a mother singing lullabies at the crib side is achieved in a single context by means of the charged emotion and identificatory function of the child.

This context relates back to childhood emotions, which are not yet determined by knowledge of the division of sex roles and its resulting voyeurism. Thus, it can also avoid the constant irritations of sexual definition. One can assume that this diffusion of sexual perception crystalizes not only a means of male but also of female socialization. At least we know that as far as children up to the age of three or four years are concerned, they possess no cognitive knowledge about sex difference, despite parents' attempts to clarify biological and social differences. Based on this early childhood ambivalence, then, it is possible to explain the fascination of women for the androgynous image of some female stars. Of course, it cannot be denied that other connotations are superimposed on these images, which relate to

interests and needs of male socializing experiences. We will return to this point later in respect to its importance for female viewers.

At the movies, protected by the dark, women can indulge in the voyeurism that is otherwise denied to them. Because they seek it at the movies does not mean, naturally, that they will find what they perhaps unconsciously want to see. First, they are dependent on the offerings of the film market, which has provided little alternative for some time now (evidence for this is to be found in the growing number of "women's cinemas" opening around the country). Numerous films present female stereotypes which do have an empirical correlative in the sociohistorical character of woman. Many men have even produced their films with a special eye toward women viewers. Female preference for melodrama, comedy, and problem films and her rejection of crime, horror, war, western, and pornographic films demonstrate that, within male production, women were able to draw boundaries of acceptability. Besides those genres they preferred, women also went to other films, either because their men wanted to see them or because they were curious about what attracted men to certain female stars.[\(2\)](#)

Other than the few psychoanalytically oriented investigations, it is remarkable that most studies of film reception are based on a role concept defined by social patterns and normative behavior. Moreover, they ignore entirely both the historical context in which these roles are grounded, and the idea of an inner nature comprised of more than the sum of roles and functions ascribed to an individual in a social system. Yet because the social roles in patriarchal society are defined exclusively in relation to the necessity of male roles as the breadwinner and worker, the women's role is viewed only as complementary. It could never constitute her own history, whereas precisely that would be the key to woman as subject. Although those studies which pose this question provide interesting conclusions about sex-specific differences, they are limited by their insufficient theoretical grounding.

Most studies on film reception pose the question of sex-specific differences very superficially. Sex does play a considerable role in research techniques. Other than the age factor, it represents the one truly independent variable for all sorts of statistical calculations. De facto, however, it remains an unknown factor, for as a biological, unchanging quantity it is neither grounded theoretically nor defined by context. Therefore, it cannot come as a surprise that the female sex is usually described in deviation from the male sex. Men like X and women prefer Y. A tour through these studies resembles a glance at a nineteenth-century atlas: blank spaces, unexplored areas that carry the names of the colonizers. The roads are known, the property rights established. Corresponding to the unspoken primacy of research interests into the male half of humanity is the mystification of woman once she has become the center of attention. According to Hegel, patriarchal society produced woman as the inner enemy, the expression of a world living according to different principles.[\(3\)](#) As a consequence, investigations into the female inner nature, into her womanhood, were

either abandoned or reduced to mystified natural categories. For if norms can no longer be derived biologically, then the social and ethical legitimization of the whole system of norms is thrown into question. But such questions have always elicited the hatred of those who have an interest in wielding power with no questions asked. As for the tendency to mystify woman, Freud has left little doubt about that:

"A part of what we men call 'the female riddle' derives perhaps from this expression of bisexuality in female life."[\(4\)](#)

In several studies the psychoanalytic approach has provided an excellent method for examining the deep layers of film perception by going beyond learning theory models. The psychoanalytic approach aims at the psychic appropriation and conversion of what is seen. It elucidates correspondences to psychological effects in the subject herself/himself. At the same time, this approach assumes that films, too, are constructed by means of psychological mechanisms. As a result, films are able to "touch" analogous structures in the viewer. Films, therefore, are not so much mere reflections of external or social nature as they are reflection and product of the inner nature of the subjects: their wishes, needs, erotic images, drives, etc.

This confusion has been the source of several misconceptions in feminist discussions. For example, it is too simplistic to assert that films by men reflect only men's view (more or less pathologically distorted perception of women) or that they say more about men's inner nature and the viewers in a patriarchal society than about the women whom they portray as the female viewer. There has not yet been any explanation for the empirical behavior of women who in the last fifteen years have abstained from going to the movies. Yet this was a time during which film offerings indeed fell to a level that exasperated the preference structures of female viewers. The question why women went to the movies before and are now beginning to go again has not been answered, despite the doubtlessly correct implication of patriarchal dominance.

The problem inherent in this question is the idea that the intention of a film can be directly transferred to the viewer. Such an idea probably derives from the remnants of everyday behaviorist consciousness. Numerous arguments from film theory can be cited that contradict this position already at the level of production. Even in the case of a director like Sternberg, who claimed that the Dietrich myth was his invention alone, there still remains a connotative margin. Although the intention of a single man and an authoritarian, patriarchal production apparatus may define a film, the specific value of every visual art and expressive form derives from something else. Images never have the clarity of verbal language, which is able to thrust itself onto conceptual meta-levels and there ascertain its meaning. The concept "table" can subsume all existing examples of tables, but the film image of a table will always be the reproduction of one existing table. The director Sternberg may intend to create the myth of a woman in his reproductions of Marlene

Dietrich, yet at the same time this myth contains an existing object of reference. Such concreteness of film images has consequences for perception. Movies can create myths, stereotypes, and clichés (images in the psychoanalytic sense), but they are in no way comparable to conceptual abstractions. They are themselves only reproductions of inner images, preverbal signs from a nonverbal world that can be made accessible only through a long process of interpretation. Of course, the impact of these images is independent of my ability to translate them into verbal expression. I can respond to film without language.

To see is to recognize," wrote Jean Mitry.⁽⁵⁾ Psychoanalytic microanalysis of seeing and recognizing shows that subjective desires do not move down one-way paths. Wherever voyeurism is permitted, the subject itself organizes what is to be recognized. In the process of viewing a film, there is a second film in his/her mind, so that a film exists in as many variants as there are viewers. This does not imply that perception is arbitrary. It seems, however, that the margin for subjective appropriation of visual objects is much larger than individual interpretations indicate. For they usually are predicated on the process of translation into verbal language, and they represent experience which has already congealed in the interpretation.

Possibly contrary to the intentions of their creators, film images lend themselves to a variety of meanings. This leads to the hypothesis that such images function for sex-specific perception just as mannerist paintings play with optical illusions. According to the position of the viewer, different motifs appear and the picture reveals a new composition or a new meaning. An example of such a process would be the reinterpretation of the female stereotypes embodied by Marilyn Monroe in her films. Another would be the rebirth of interest in Mae West, an actress whom U.S. feminists in the forties criticized intensely, whereas today they critically accept her autonomous characteristics.

The fact that we lack any reconstructions of historical forms of film appropriation by women is certainly a sign that we have yet to recognize the woman as subject. We know that such forms must have existed empirically, but we do not know how they interacted and what they are today. In the search for her own identity, a woman almost always draws on the images which male society has projected of her. Thus, there has been a series of excellent feminist analyses of female images. They all come to the conclusion that such images are male reconstructions, projections of male myths about women and/or male anxieties. Yet there are almost no attempts to comprehend the subjective meaning of these images for women. Perhaps there is fear of contamination, the fear of losing oneself once again among the false images if the analytic distance is relinquished. Consequently, we know little about the empirical effects and correspondences of these images in women. This suggests more than mere normative pressure for certain kinds of behavior conveyed by the obvious message of the films: what behavior is desired or not, how a hairstyle should look, or how to say goodbye to a husband in the morning. Here the question arises whether there might

not be a female subhistory in the appropriation of film. It would not be defined solely by the tyranny of the male stare but would open minimal margins for female projections.

Laura Mulvey has argued in her analysis of psychological structures in Hollywood narrative film that the image of the star Marlene Dietrich is grounded in a mechanism which interprets the woman as a castrated man. Moreover, the mechanism seeks to ameliorate this threatening model of incomparable punishment by offering, instead of a penis [sic], a fetishizing idealization to get over the loss. The image of the vamp is explained, then, in terms of classical psychoanalytical assumptions about the male castration complex which fetishizes the woman according to male needs. Mulvey does not pursue the implications of this Freudian assertion for the female viewer. In Freudian theory, not only the man experiences the woman as castrated but also the woman experiences herself in this way. That would be one explanation for why women (at least so-called "phallic women") enjoy fetishized stars just as much as men do.(6)

It should be noted that Freud's thesis about the female castration complex must be considered within its proper historical context. This is not an anthropologically grounded, natural mechanism in female socialization. Rather, it is a mechanism which is valid for some women, and for those only as long as phallocratic traits are socially immanent. Thus, the phallus which the star fetish is to replace retains its power only when connected with social power, as is generally the case in male societies. The strength of social components in determining sex-role identity has been sufficiently demonstrated by studies on cognitive development among children.(7) Ulrike Prokop mentions that it is possible to find in a reconstruction of this fundamental psychoanalytical assertion an historical, empirical correlative:

“Both sexes choose a false symbol, which in the subconscious is a symbol of freedom, power and status. Meaningful relations are destroyed because the male fetishizes this symbol in order to overcome his fear of woman. He scorns the woman so that he can prove his superiority and integrity, whereas the woman does not come to terms with her self-depreciation, which is likewise repressed. Both sexes interact on the basis of the mutual affirmation of this false identification. Their union leads to subjective suffering. This false identification resides in the realm of normalcy as long as the capacity to love and to work is not disrupted. It is a part of institutionalized alienation.”(8)

Women's oppression does not begin with their false image. This is one of the cardinal mistakes of many analyses. They confuse the effect with the cause, and then they cannot explain why women still want to look at phallocratic films. Not until we have clarified which needs Hollywood's phallocentric films produce and which they appear to satisfy can we understand why women too idolize female stars. That is not to suggest

that the reasons for female adulation of male stars such as Rudolph Valentino or James Dean have been explained.

In their well-known study, Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites dissected the "good-evil girl syndrome in U.S. film, and they pointed to several other specific cultural images of women in a comparison of international films.⁽⁹⁾ If their conclusions are correct — and there is little reason to doubt it — then we find here a further expression of the needs of the female public. The split into good-bad, mother-whore, marriage-eroticism, and fidelity-promiscuity (topics which constitute the themes of many films), this split indeed corresponds to the psychic split in the woman between the evil, phallic woman and the woman who accepts her subordinate role as weak but good and family-oriented. Clamped between these false alternatives, women begin to long for release into a new identity. The longing existed before the recent women's movement sought to conceptualize and articulate it in order to end the curse of the "mutual affirmation of this false identification" (Prokop). Yet many films thematize this disjuncture, and the parts of the split personality are resolved in apparent harmony. Split erotic needs for unconfirmed sexuality without dependency and norms can be recognized in stereotypes such as the vamp (who throws herself at men) and the cold-blooded criminal (who prefers "bad male company"). A passionate female moviegoer formulated this ambivalence in herself and in film images in the following way: "I always wanted to live as freely as Pola Negri, but in fact I was more like Paula Wessely."⁽¹⁰⁾

The image of the vamp has far more connotations than the fetishized image of the phallus substitute. For the man she represents the idealized woman, in some cases even stylized into a phallus. Tailored dresses were exceptionally well suited for this purpose. They enwrapped the body like a luminous second skin. In a similar style tight caps often adorned the head to emphasize the rod-like form. In the fifties artificially shaped breasts were not infrequently modeled like the glans of an erect penis. To consider just one example, *THE LIFE OF MRS. SKEFFINGTON* (V. Sherman, 1944) takes up a type of female narcissism as a subject, which characterizes the vamp just as well as the above-mentioned function for male viewers, i.e., phallic women. Bette Davis plays an exceptionally beautiful young woman who marries an extraordinarily rich older man. In the course of their marriage, Mrs. Skeffington enjoys an extravagant social life primarily in the company of young admirers. When she finally quarrels with her husband, she sinks totally into the attitude of the beautiful spoiled woman who directs all her time and personality toward the exhibition and appreciation of her physical beauty. What autonomy she achieves in this manner is characterized by complete indifference. She has the ability to control men, but she is in no way erotically dependent on them. She collects them as a mirror for her beauty. Naturally a serious illness is the punishment for this woman's narcissism. At the end she returns repentant as an old woman to her husband, who has become *blind*.

If we ignore the affirmative ending and the general mediocrity of this

not atypical film, it illustrates how female stereotypes can be found which also offer gratification to women. And let us not forget that melodrama is one of the genres preferred by women (this film actually tends toward the "problem film" with its political themes of anti-Semitism and Jewish persecution in Nazi Germany). In short, Mrs. Skeffington's narcissism is simply denounced in an affirmative way and pressed into the scheme of the "good-evil girl" so prevalent in the U.S. film. Female beauty, the product of concentrating all energies on exhibitionism and erotic tension within one's own body, is reserved for the husband as the sole benefactor.

In comparison, Marlene Dietrich develops this component of female eroticism much more radically. In *BLUE ANGEL* (Josef von Sternberg, 1930) she presents an image of autonomy and power which many women yoked into a marriage must have dreamed about. Lola can sing about men who swarm around her like moths around a light bulb. She can attract, among others, the absolutely unerotic Professor Unrat. He, in turn, is prepared to pay the highest price for his love to her. He offers Lola the greatest narcissistic satisfaction by sacrificing his social position for her.

In an early essay on film reception Paul G. Cressey defined the possibilities for projection, introjection, and displacement as modes of identification.⁽¹¹⁾ We can assume that these modes correspond to preference structures of female viewers. This would suggest that particularly the strongest form of identification, introjection, has become increasingly difficult for women. Consequently women have abstained from going to the movies to a proportionately greater extent because projection and displacement (the weaker forms of gratification) are the only forms left in the declining number of film productions. In fact precisely those genres are disappearing from among film offerings which would be most likely to allow introjective identification. When identification can only be achieved by means of projection and displacement, interest in going to the movies decreases. Indeed, television also offers these possibilities. Yet, because of its specific aesthetic and social characteristics, TV actually tends to inhibit total introjection with all sorts of distracting mechanisms for the viewers.

Cressey's concepts could be reconstructed psychoanalytically according to a model developed by Gunther Salje.⁽¹²⁾ Salje asserts that the specific effect of visual media is based on a mode of transference in which preverbal, i.e., presymbolic scenes (as in an "Ur-scene"), are reactivated in the dimension of the unconscious. The clichés are representations of early childhood interactions and forms of experiencing. These are not raised to the level of symbolically mediated representation, as would be the case in therapeutic transference. This is the source of that repressive, pre-rational potential of influence in the visual image: its impact is almost direct. The stronger the transference situation, the more complete is the identification. Although Salje makes the mode of transference the condition sine qua non of film and TV viewing, it should be kept in mind that the intensity of the transference is always

dependent on the transference stimuli contained in the film material itself.

The introjective plunge of total identification in such a transference seems to be less and less likely because of the film offerings. The lack of identificatory film images for women corresponds to the absence of women among the moviegoers. Meanwhile the narcissistic and voyeuristic components in the gratification structure of the female viewer have broken down. The image of the vamp, of the autonomous, narcissistic woman has made way for that diffuse female image which only distinguishes between friend and sex object. This polarization corresponds only in a rudimentary manner to the ambivalences and role divisions which constitute womanhood. Thus, the transference situation has become increasingly difficult for women to produce at the movies. Empty TV stereotypes, which are open to all types of projection, lend themselves better to such an end. The absence of women at the movies is part of the identity crisis of womanhood. The female images in films by men draw only on the repressive demystification of woman. Her riddle, her bisexuality, becomes no more than a superficial stimulus in soft-core porno. Grandiose idealization, which, according to Morgenthau, describes one trait of the perverse,⁽¹³⁾ has become eclipsed in film images as an authentic aura of female narcissism.

Notes

¹ Gisela Schneider and Klaus Laermann, "AugenBlicke. Über einige Vorurteile und Einschränkungen geschlechtsspezifischer Wahrnehmung," *Kursbuch*, 49 (1977), p. 54.

² Cf. statements by interviewees in the Ernest Dichter International, Ltd., study, "Freizeitbedürfnisse und Präferenzstruktur des Filmpublikums in der Bundesrepublik," in Dieter Prokop, *Materialien zur Theorie des Films* (Munich, 1971), pp. 339-82, and Dieter Prokop, *Soziologie des Films* (Neuwied and Berlin, 1970).

³ According to Hegel (*Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Hamburg, 1952, p. 340),

"Since the community subsists only by breaking in upon family happiness and dissolving individual self-consciousness into the universal, it creates its own enemy in what it oppresses and in what is at the same time essential to it — womankind in general."

⁴ Sigmund Freud, "Neue Folge der Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse," in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 15 (Frankfurt/Main, 1967), p. 140 ("On Womanhood").

⁵ Jean Mitry, *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma*, (Paris, 1963).

⁶ Translator's note: Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Women and Cinema*, ed. Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary (New

York: Dutton, 1977), pp. 412-28.

7. Cf. "Analyse der Geschlechtsrollen-Konzepte und Attitüden bei Kindern unter dem Aspekt der kognitiven Entwicklung," in Lawrence Kohlberg, *Zur kognitiven Entwicklung des Kindes* (Frankfurt/Main, 1974), pp. 334-471. Kohlberg asserts that not only does the perception of specific body metaphors contribute to sex role identity, but also obvious social norms about roles.

8. Ulrike Prokop, *Weiblicher Lebenszusammenhang. Von der Beschränktheit der Strategien und der Unangemessenheit der Wünsche* (Frankfurt/Main, 1976), p. 142 (in excerpt: "Production and the Context of Women's Daily Life," in *New German Critique*, 13 (Winter 1978), 18-33.

9. Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites, *Movies: A Psychological Study* (Glencoe, Ill., 1950), pp. 25-46.

10. Cf. Gisela von Wysocki, "Gespräch mit meiner Mutter," *frauen und film*, 17 (1978).

11. Paul G. Cressey, "The Motion Picture Experience as Modified Social Background and Personality," *American Sociological Review* 3, No. 4 (August 1938), 516-25.

"Whereas projection implies an unwarranted delimitation of the province of the self, introjection is an 'incorporation of a part of the environment into the concept of self'" (J. K. Folson, *The Family*. New York: 1935).

Displacement, however, denotes a partial substitution of certain personalities and values of one's own social world for the characters and objects in the screen milieu while continuing, as oneself, to experience imaginative participation in the screen action" (p. 520). Pola Negri was the heroine fatale of post-World War I German cinema, starring in films such as Lubitsch's *MADAME DUBARRY*; Paula Wessely was the idealized "little woman" of twenties' entertainment films.

12. Gunther Salje, "Psychoanalytische Aspekte der Film- und Fernsehanalyse," in Thomas Leithäuser et al., *Entwurf zu einer Empirie des Alltagsbewusstseins* (Frankfurt/Main, 1977), pp. 261-87.

"This mode should be considered as a typical transference climate because it is present in almost all film and television content; only the intensity seems to differ depending on the material" (p. 279).

13. Fritz Morgenthaller, "Verkehrsformen der Perversion und die Perversion der Verkehrsformen. Ein Blick über den Zaun der Psychoanalyse," *Kursbuch*, 49 (1977), 135-51.

"It is a question of access to the grandiose. The glamour of self-estimation carries with it for everyone traces of that

grandiose omnipotence from childhood ... Perverse experience represents a quantitative progression and sexual enhancement of the grandiose. The perverse has much more direct access to sensuality. However, it leads to a qualitatively different intercourse with sensuality which is no longer adapted to reality" (p. 136).

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Mother Krause's Trip to Happiness Kino-culture in Weimar Germany, Part 2

by Jan-Christopher Horak

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“Tenements Kill Like an Ax”

After numerous forays into commercial cinema, Soviet-German co-productions, and political documentaries, MOTHER KRAUSE'S TRIP TO HAPPINESS (1929) culminated the Prometheus Film Collective's efforts to fuse documentary agit-prop and proletarian melodrama, Soviet montage and German moving camera, film acting and amateur theater. While synthesizing such Soviet models as Pudovkin's MOTHER and Vertov's THE MAN WITH THE MOVIE CAMERA, MOTHER KRAUSE reflected the living conditions of the German proletariat, more specifically the plight of working-class women in the Weimar Republic. Directed by Piel Jützi from a script by Jan Fethke and Willi Döll, MOTHER KRAUSE also proved to be both a commercial success and effective propaganda.

It was the painter Otto Nagel, who after the death of his friend, Heinrich Zille, went to the Prometheus in August 1929, hoping a truly revolutionary Zille film could be produced. A member of the Social Democratic Party since 1871 (after 1919, KPD), Zille worked as a printer most of his life but became known as a cartoonist and photographer. Zille's "Milljöh" (Berlin dialect for milieu) was the area of Berlin-Wedding, the "red" Wedding. While Zille's photographs, strongly reminiscent of Jacob Reis' New York tenement images, documented without pathos the harsh reality of the slums, and his cartoons softened the pain with humor. His subjects were friends and neighbors, workers, washerwomen, prostitutes, pimps, bums, ragged children between tenements, old men on park benches, working-class pubs, public soup kitchens, the proletariat and lumpenproletariat.

The commercial cinema industry soon discovered Zille. Giving local color to chiché-ridden plots, many so-called Zille films co-opted Zille's motifs for purely decorative effect. An even greater travesty were the faddish "Zille balls," where Berlin's aristocratic and nouveaux riches dressed in rags to drink champagne and dance the night away. Zille repeatedly complained that his name was being misused by capitalist film producers, interested only in box office receipts. With the enthusiastic support of the Prometheus film collective and Berlin's working-class districts, the first authentic Zille film was finished in less than four months at a cost of only 35,000 Reichs Marks.[\(1\)](#)

MOTHER KRAUSE opens with a swooping moving camera montage through the alleys and over the rooftops of Wedding. In this environment old Mother Krause shares a small apartment with her unemployed son, Paul, and her daughter, Erna, while subletting the only bedroom to a prostitute, her little girl, and her pimp. At the fairgrounds, Erna meets a class-conscious worker, Max, and they soon become lovers. Meanwhile, Paul gets drunk on money that his mother has earned delivering newspapers. Desperate to help her mother meet her financial obligations, Erna goes to "borrow" money from a rich benefactor, aware that he might expect a favor in return. But she can't go through with it and flees, joining Max at a demonstration. That night they take Mother Krause to a workers' garden festival while Paul and the pimp rob a pawn shop. Worried about her court summons, Mother Krause returns home to find her son being arrested. In an act of final desperation, she turns on the gas, killing herself and the little girl.

Mother Krause, old, grey, and bent, in a simple black dress, is the symbol of the helplessly exploited poor, forever chained to their class. The deep-set lines on her face give evidence of her lifelong struggle for survival. She is triply oppressed: as a woman, as an old person, and as a worker. Honest, hard working, and determined, she prays that these virtues will bring her happiness. She soon realizes that the system is programmed against her and her class. In one sequence, she runs down endless corridors from one government office to another, but the doors remain locked or are slammed in her face. That the poor, the old, and the sick are doomed to be exploited leaves her without hope. Before she turns on the fatal gas, she says to the sleeping child:

"What does a poor creature like you have to gain in this world?"

Thus, only in death does she believe there to be a release from the pain. Shrouded in ignorance, her attitude, like that of the Christian poor through the ages, is both apolitical and totally fatalistic. Unlike Pudovkin's Soviet mother, Germany's Mother Krause cannot find the way to a "revolutionary consciousness." [\(2\)](#) That Mother Krause in her final act of resignation unwittingly murders the youngest generation of woman is both a warning to the proletariat and a bitter indictment of the capitalist system.

The pimp and his wife, on the other hand, already convinced that their class is damned, fight back with the only means they think they have at their disposal: crime and prostitution. Their asocial behavior is acceptable in a nether world, where bourgeois values are a luxury no one can afford. But prostitutes and pimps in turn exploit their own class, and as Otto Rühle remarks in his *Illustrated Social History of the Proletariat* (1930):

"Their goal is individual security, not the collective security of the proletariat." [\(3\)](#)

Their selfishness is demonstrated when Mother Krause asks to borrow some money and they plead poverty. Their contemptuous attitude towards the honest poor is made clear in another scene. The pimp, having again had his sexual advances rebuffed by Erna, maliciously informs Max that he's had Erna before. Mother Krause gets very upset but is forced to hold her tongue because the pimp threatens to move out. Later the pimp leads Paul into the unsuccessful robbery scheme, while his wife suggests Erna visit one of her clients.

Thus, these lumpenproletariat, although they are products of a class society, are presented as counterrevolutionary elements from which the class-conscious proletariat must distance itself. The pimp and the prostitute are the only characters not given proper names in the narrative. Still both betray human characteristics beyond caricature. The pimp at one point goes to find Paul and then helps Mother Krause home when her drunk son slaps her. The prostitute's underlying goodness is revealed at her wedding. To quote Otto Rühle:

"Workers must declare their solidarity with prostitutes by convincing them of their false path." [\(4\)](#)

Paul portrays the weak, spineless working man who, because of his apolitical stance, slips into the dishonorable life of a petty thief. One of six million unemployed, Paul occasionally sells a few rags, but more often he spends his time drinking in a pub. His character weakness is already evident near the beginning of the film when, thirsty for a beer, he tries to pry some coins from the little girl's piggy bank. In the Berlin dialect, he is called a "Penner," a sleeper, a do-nothing. Basically honest, he nevertheless sees robbery as a quick and easy way to "earn" back his mother's money. It is a delusion which not only lands him in prison but also drives his mother to her death. Ironically, the robbery fails because Paul finds a brooch his mother has pawned and is overcome by guilt and self-pity. Clearly, the Pauls, the apolitical working men faced with years of unemployment and poverty, can find self-worth only through class struggle.

Strong, determined, and optimistic, Paul's opposite is Max. Working on a road construction gang, Max is a conscientious organizer and comrade in the party. Already at the fairgrounds, Max's politics are indicated when he demonstratively leaves an overly exploitative sideshow. When Erna comes to his rooftop flat, he proudly points to a picture of Marx

and later gives her a copy of Bebel's *Woman in Class Struggle*. Yet Max too is still in the process of developing class consciousness. When he deserts Erna, because she has had previous sexual relations with the pimp, his friend and comrade must remind him that "the environment and not the girl is at fault." Max must overcome a slightly puritan attitude, already in evidence when he says goodnight to a disappointed Erna with no more than a perfunctory kiss. It is only after Erna finds Max and he pulls her into the column of marching workers that they are reconciled.

Erna too must undergo a learning process to achieve class consciousness. In the very first shot of Erna, we see her dancing with the pimp. After she meets Max at the fairgrounds, she attempts to put a stop to the pimp's sexual advances. Her rejection of his world in favor of Max's world view is, at first, emotionally and not politically motivated. Only after she nearly falls into the life of a prostitute and is repulsed and debased by its exploitation is her consciousness raised. As she is enclosed into the ranks of the proletariat, she makes a political commitment. The demonstrators carry banners asking *working women and mothers* to join the ranks.

For the audience, then, Erna becomes the central model for their own developing political consciousness. In this sense, she is very much in the tradition of Pudovkin's heroic figures, who through a series of circumstances take up the struggle against their oppressors. Yet unlike *STORM OVER ASIA*, for example, *MOTHER KRAUSE*'s narrative doesn't end in a moment of revolutionary optimism, with the integration of its central character into the politically committed masses. Erna must witness the death of her mother, a victim of the very forces that have become her enemy. She realizes that a very long, difficult, and painful struggle lies ahead before social justice is achieved. Thus, in this moment of despair, there lies another small awakening for Erna, another step towards an understanding of the dialectic movement of history. The closing image of workers' feet marching brings us back to the masses, indicating that the struggle will be carried on.

Erna stands above the hopeless resignation of her old mother and the ruthless cynicism of the prostitute, as a positive image for working-class women. While the murder of the little girl demonstrates the destructive force of Mother Krause's despair, the self-destructive nature of the prostitute's daily humiliation is also rejected. That the *dramatis locus* is shifted to this constellation of proletarian women seems evident, considering that the original treatment calls for Mother Krause to have two sons similar to Paul and Max. Clearly, Erna's ideological growth is affected by emotional situations: her love for Max, her brush with prostitution, the death of her mother. The filmmakers have incorporated melodramatic plot devices to give dramatic credence to their ideological framework, in the same way that Pudovkin uses these devices, e.g., in *MOTHER*, where the mother joins the revolution only after the death of her husband and the arrest of her son. This tendency toward melodrama in *MOTHER KRAUSE* is, however, adequately modified by a brutally

realistic depiction of the historical environment and is thus quite justified as a means of raising audience consciousness.

In the last analysis, it is the working people of the “red” Wedding who are the film’s central characters. In the scenes of proletarian life, a documentary portrait of a city comes to life. Compared to such contemporary efforts as Ruttmann's *BERLIN SYMPHONY* (1926) and *PEOPLE ON SUNDAY* (1929), though, the film opts for radical perspectives rather than liberal new objectivity. At the same time, *MOTHER KRAUSE*'s depiction of people within a modern cityscape tends towards the warmth of Alfred Döblin's novel, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1928). Though dynamically edited, the film never breaks down into rhythmic plays with light and shade, a serious problem with Ruttmann.

Much of *MOTHER KRAUSE* is inspired by Heinrich Zille's drawings. Both sympathetic towards their subjects and militant in their moral stance, Zille's cartoons confront the proletariat with their environment both visually and aurally, through the Berlin dialect. Like the masses in Döblin's novel (which has been called “cinematic”), Zille's masses are the sum of individual, humanized portraits. These prototypical proletarian figures, their dreams and motivations, are indivisible from their social environment. The scenes in the working-class pubs are pure Zille in their composition of subjects. Here fat women in floppy hats and skinny men in their worn-out bowlers gather for their beer and the latest news, while drunks sleep with their heads atop the tables and couples grope for each other under them. The corner pub is a meeting place for unsavory elements as well as for the working man according to Zille. This does not, however, keep him from polemicizing in his cartoons against excessive drinking. Already at the beginning of the film we see drunks tripping through street crowds and sleeping on empty back lots. Later, encouraged by his friends, Paul drinks up his mother's livelihood, then assaults her in a drunken stupor. At the fairgrounds the camera pans through the crowd, discovering another Zille motif, two drunks brawling.

The scenes at the fairgrounds, at Berlin's Lake Wann, and at a garden festival also pay homage to Zille. Zille's cartoons lovingly depict whole families with grandparents, naked children, baby carriages, beer and picnic baskets in tow. The filmmakers continuously cut away to these “Zille types,” e.g., when Max and Erno are swimming, we see an old couple petting on the beach like teenagers. At the garden festival, most probably WIR sponsored, an amateur orchestra plays while couples dance and children play on a merry-go-round. A sense of community seems to exude from these film scenes, and they are filmed without a touch of condescension. But the problems are never forgotten. From the beach scenes, we cut to Paul's drinking spree while at the festival Mother Krause worries about her Prussian court summons.

The proletarian wedding scene was also directly copied from a Zille cartoon, “Wedding at Paesik's.” A bride in white with child, a rotund

bald man, a beer keg and phonograph propped up on a chair, a cramped table in an overcrowded room made up the details familiar to Zille readers. They also recognized the houses, streets, and backcourts, as well as the actors. Not only was most of the film shot on location in Berlin, but also most of the actors were nonprofessionals (excepting the leads) who had been picked up off the streets in Berlin-Wedding because they looked like Zille people. These workers, many unemployed, played for no more than beer and sandwiches while the professional actors received no more than 200 Reichsmarks:

“The production of the film was a truly collective work, where enthusiasm and ideas substituted for the lacking financial means ... Many important details not in the script were developed during the filming. The ideas came from everyone: the actors, Käthe Kollwitz, Otto Nagel, the director, and especially from the nonprofessional actors who played themselves.”⁽⁵⁾

Pudovkin's influence can again be seen in the handling of these nonprofessional actors-, e.g., when Jützi cuts to close-ups of shocked faces in the pub after Paul slaps his mother. The scene recalls Pudovkin's Mongolian fur traders in *STORM OVER ASIA*, a scene analyzed by Pudovkin in *Film Technique*.⁽⁶⁾ Yet *MOTHER KRAUSE*'s Zille types are not film types in the Eisensteinian or Pudovkinian sense, since they are not exclusively defined by the montage of actor and object. Observed in a specific environment, thus ontologically indivisible from their milieu, the actors move with such naturalness that even the staged scenes take on a documentary quality.

The first fifty-five shots in *MOTHER KRAUSE* (five minutes) are in fact a pure documentary portrait of Berlin's working-class slums. In the opening shots the camera pans endlessly up and down tenement walls, searching for an exit from the darkness: “The dismal world of the servile and enslaved, the wretched wards of sunless tenements” (title). The camera picks up life on the streets: a market hawker, an old horse collapsing, old men and women in a park staring into space, children playing in a sandbox dwarfed by tenement walls. The camera pans down from a group of silent, old women to a newspaper headline: “Beauty is tops.” A handheld camera follows three babbling drunks while others sleep behind rubbish piles. Pan, dolly, and tilt shots link through montage the film's thematic focal points: old people, children, alcohol, housing, women, and general resignation.

The montage of dynamically changing images is a radical synthesis of Soviet editing and German moving camera. Unlike expressionist cinema, where the mobile camera is utilized for subjective visions, Jützi's moving camera shots act as engaged observers of the dismal details of proletarian life. This aspect of the camera as discoverer of social evil is especially evident in the opening sequence but also throughout the film. The narrative is thus indivisibly welded to the documentary environment through the moving camera. (Jützi had

already used a similar moving camera montage in HUNGER IN WALDENBURG to visualize the inhuman conditions in the tenements.) The actual political analysis is developed through associative montage in conjunction with the moving camera. When Mother Krause receives her summons for embezzling newspaper receipts, the camera pans around her empty kitchen to the summons on the table; dissolve to an extreme close up of the letter's Prussian seal; tilt up to an eagle perched above the clock's face; close up of the eagle; fast dolly in to an extreme close up of the eagle's claw. The montage indicates that time is running out for Mother Krause. The state's ruthless force is unequivocal in its preservation of bourgeois law. Clarifying the motivations for her suicide, the tilt up to the eagle is repeated after she turns on the fatal gas. Earlier, Mother Krause is seen leaving a number of bureaucratic offices, attempting to plead her case. In a series of pan dissolves, we see her standing in front of the bureaus, never inside them, reinforcing the facelessness of Prussian bureaucracy. That the summons arrives the very afternoon her employers fire her gives credence to the suggestion that bureaucrats will work swiftly for the ruling political structures.

Yet the film achieves its propagandistic effect by concretely visualizing the oppression of the working class without overtly pointing a finger at the oppressors or suggesting concrete political action. (Censors consistently cut demonstration scenes organized by revolutionary parties because they "presented a danger to public security and order."⁽⁷⁾ Mother Krause ends with a demonstration only six seconds long due to censors' scissors. The final shot of Erna's feet marching with the proletariat suggests that in the final analysis only two roads are open to the worker: death with the gas main or active political struggle. Other forms of escape, e.g., crime, prostitution, or alcohol, only perpetrate the exploitation of the poor because they tacitly accept the power of the ruling class.

The final image, then, is one of hope for the revolution to come. The revolution, despite setbacks, lives on in what George Bluestone calls a mystical futurity. The revolution, i.e., bringing down the whole body politic, is postponed in favor of a more modest goal, namely the formation of a class-conscious revolutionary proletariat. In this sense, MOTHER KRAUSE is very different from its Soviet cousins. The historical struggles and defeats in POTEMKIN and MOTHER are mitigated through the knowledge that the filmed revolution already exists in the present as fact. Pudovkin and Eisenstein are more concerned with strengthening the ideological walls of the revolution through historical analysis. MOTHER KRAUSE can't rely on such hindsight. Rather, it is still laying the groundwork for a future revolution, hoping to convince the audience of its inevitability.

Ironically, MOTHER KRAUSE's final image became an often used image for the fascist right. Both Trenker's THE REBEL (1932) and HITLER, JUNGE QUEX (1933) end with troops marching into the sky and ultimate victory after the hero's death. Yet the geometric constellations of Nazis marching mystically into the heavens are a far cry from

Communist demonstrators in *MOTHER KRAUSE*, who keep their feet firmly on the pavement. On the contrary, the demonstrators symbolize the wish of the class-conscious masses for a united front against the rising tide of fascism.

MOTHER KRAUSE'S TRIP TO HAPPINESS, then, marks a high point in Weimar working-class film culture. Only Werner Hochbaum's recently discovered film, *BROTHERS* (1929), a fictional documentary account of the 1896 Hamburg dockworkers' strike, seems to achieve a similar synthesis of political agitation and radical form. Hans Tinter's *CYNAKALI* (1930), a working-class story advocating the repeal of abortion laws, on the other hand, displays admirable politics but a dull, anachronistic style. Piel Jützi's adaptation of Döblin's *BERLIN-ALEXANDER-PLACE* (1931) starring the ex-Communist and soon to become super-Nazi, Heinrich George, is, for all its stylistic bravura, a shallow, noncommitted film. *KUHLE WAMPE* (1932), despite structural difficulties due to the adverse conditions during filming, must be evaluated as the Prometheus collective's swan song.

Thus, the Prometheus collective's production efforts, synthesizing narrative forms of popular cinema and politically committed documentaries, practically ended after the huge success of *MOTHER KRAUSE*. As mentioned in Part I, this was in large part due to economic factors such as the depression and the prohibitive cost of sound production. But it also seems to be no coincidence that the Prometheus's period of greatest achievement (1926-1929) corresponded to a momentary trend in Comintern policies, whereby the CP openly supported alliances with other nonsectarian, leftwing organizations. The work of the WIR, as well as the Popular Association for Film Art in Berlin, was made possible through cooperation between the CP and leftwing political affiliations. Likewise, Willi Münzenberg's WIR propaganda work in publishing and film was highly successful because of his ability to enlist into the cause leftist writers and artists not necessarily members of the CP. While promoting working-class solidarity against the murderous power of monopoly capitalism, these intellectuals were nevertheless given the freedom to experiment with popular forms accessible to all segments of the proletariat. It was in this spirit of solidarity that *MOTHER KRAUSE'S TRIP TO HAPPINESS* was created.

Notes

[1.](#) Babette Gross, *Willi Münzenberg* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1967). Margot Michaelis mentions 60,000 RM, 175,000 RM being the average cost at the time, in *Film und Realität in der Weimarer Republik* (Munich: Carl Nanser Verlag, 1978), p. 110.

[2.](#) Both figures are inspired by Käthe Kollwitz's famous drawing "Mother." A proletarian "mother" with features almost identical to Mother Krause appears prominently in Hochbaum's *BROTHERS* (1929). She too must take care of a household in her old age while her daughter-in-law lies sick in bed with TB. She must helplessly witness a

break in relations between her two sons: one a dockworker, the other a member of the police force which brutally suppresses the dockworkers' strike.

[3.](#) Otto Rühle, *Illustrierte Kultur und Sittengeschichte des Proletariats* (Berlin, 1930; reprint ed., Frankfurt: Verlag Neue Kritik KG, 1971), p. 487.

[4.](#) Rühle, p. 487.

[5.](#) Michael Hamisch, *Mutter Krausens Fahrt in Glück* (Berlin: Henschel Verlag, 1976), p. 180.

[6.](#) Pudovkin, *Film Technique* (New York: Grove Press, 1970), p. 143.

[7.](#) Official censorship notes for *Facts* (1930), quoted in *Proletarische Filme* (Munich: UNIDOC brochure), p. 30.

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The movies and Münsterberg

by George Mitchell

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During the first quarter of the twentieth century, official ideology about the use of leisure became reformulated. By the 1920s an influential portion of the U.S. elite had come to accept and in some cases actively promote the idea of leisure as an escape from the woes of everyday life. This notion offered a radical departure from previous thinking — that leisure culture should inculcate bourgeois virtues such as religious piety, obedience to authority and adherence to the work ethic. Prior to WWI most popular pastimes which did not serve these ends received condemnation in pulpits, newspapers, and some thousands of anti-amusements tracts, denouncing such diversions as dancing, gambling, novel reading, theatre going, drinking and, after the turn of the century, movie attendance.

One factor behind this negative assessment of escapist leisure was the idea that such escapism undermined productive relations and an atmosphere of discipline and repression, seen as necessary to keep the populace hard working and orderly. The often erotic and violent content of commercial amusements seemed a threat to social control. Nineteenth century guardians of culture felt incredibly sensitive to these potential dangers. The famous anti-vice crusader Anthony Comstock, for example, wanted to repress popular, working class "story papers," claiming,

"The finest fruits of civilization are consumed by these vermin."

On another level, capitalists and their spokesmen saw the money spent on these amusements as causing poverty and workers' dissatisfaction with wages. Finding a negative relation between idle amusements and work, one critic noted,

"All amusements which add to rather than detract from the fatigues of necessary toil — no matter what their attraction or interest — must be in their nature contraband and a danger to a pure standard of virtue and morals."

In the stark calculus of another guardian of culture,

“The more leisure a man whose family is living in a new tenement has, the worse off he is.”

This harsh evaluation of escapist amusement began to soften in the teens and became increasingly unpopular after WWI. While my concern here mainly focuses on how this ideological shift was tied to new forms of work and consumption, other contributing factors deserve note. One, people's attitude changed about sexual morality and the upper classes' role in morally policing public amusements. New ideas about sexuality gaining rapid acceptance around this time made the old moral critique of popular amusements seem time-worn and repressive. Generally, younger intellectuals rejected old ideas about cultural policing.

Here the actual experience with government censorship during WWI became formative. Magazines like *The Nation* and *Independent*, which before the war regarded film censorship as a potentially useful weapon against movie excess, after the war rejected this option. The middle class' experiences with Prohibition also turned it away from the idea of cultural policing. Increasingly the metropolitan-based media saw old attempts to control leisure culture as politically reactionary and bigoted. *The American Mercury*, for example, denounced the post-WWI movement for strong film censorship (a movement with wide support in rural and small town United States), branded it as the "Cuckoo Klux Klan of Art" and noted:

“All censors are curious birds but the motion picture censor is the choicest of them all. This bird can neither sing nor lay eggs, and probably never mates but it cackles continuously.”

Changes in the U.S. economy that blurred the distinction between productive and unproductive consumption also helped legitimize escapist amusements. The country was moving from an economy dominated by capital goods production (rails, machines, etc.) to one which depended more on producing consumer goods, such as autos, home appliances, clothes and radios. Official ideology shifted away from a savings ethic to a consumption ethic. This shift diminished the argument that escapist amusements were wasteful and unproductive. Furthermore, many of the most popular amusements — mass magazines and movies — now had links with other branches of the consumer goods sector. They could display the magical new commodities through advertisements and photographic representation.

The most striking evidence of this new thinking about escapist leisure presents itself in the way attitudes evolved about the movie business. Take for example the reactions of William DeMille, brother of C.B. DeMille. In 1911 William DeMille, a New York playwright from a prestigious theater family, heard that the promising young actress Mary Pickford would abandon the theater for the movies. He conveyed his dismay to the famous Broadway director David Belasco:

“I met her a few weeks ago and the poor kid is actually thinking of taking up moving pictures seriously. That appealing personality of hers would go a long way in the theater and now she's throwing her whole career in the ash-can and burying herself in a cheap form of amusement which hasn't a single point that I can see to recommend it.”[\(1\)](#)

Two years later DeMille was confronted with another defection to the movies. Cecil B., after involvement in two unsuccessful Broadway productions, joined with vaudeville producer Jesse Lasky and former glove salesman Samuel Goldfish in a movie venture. William reprimanded Cecil for entering a business which to William's mind was merely a way of "teasing nickles and dimes out of the mentally immature by making photographs leap and prance in the air." He also invoked the family name: he wrote Cecil on September 4, 1913,

"Even if you do succeed in scratching out a bare living, is it worth the loss of prestige which is sure to result from selling your birthright for a mass of celluloid?"

Yet only a few years later the lure of screen dollars and fame caught up with even William DeMille. "It shocked many people," he wrote in an essay called "Great Pictures and the Men Who Made Them," "that they were not averse to accepting large incomes for work which seemed so gay and carefree.”[\(2\)](#) In 1916, William DeMille, now in California, wrote back East to prominent critic Brander Mathews about his new perspective:

“I find that the directors' work is relatively even more important on the screen than on the stage... here is the opportunity to reach as many millions through the screen as thousands through the stage.”[\(3\)](#)

By the twenties DeMille stood at a sufficient distance from his earlier negative view that he could brand it as hypocritical and snobbish:

“Utter condemnation of the 'movie' has, for some years, been considered the mark of culture among those academic individuals who, by the divine right of higher education look down... upon anything so low that it has the misfortune to be popular.” [\(4\)](#)

DeMille now saw the medium as loaded with potential for cultural uplift:

“Its power to convey information, to reveal humanity to the human race, to make the people of the world know and even understand one another, to set ideals and ideas before the public in a way that may be comprehended by all marks the beginning of a new turn in the artistic education of mankind.”

While culture critics continued to denounce Hollywood movies in the 1920s and after, we find in the post-WWI period a growing body of opinion pronouncing movies and the movie habit perfectly in keeping with U.S. aims. Behind this acceptance lay this realization: that escapist entertainments did not undercut productive relations or foster social unrest. Indeed, movies increasingly became promoted as an important recuperative from the strains and stresses of work and modern life.

The acceptance of the Hollywood film as a fitting way to pass idle time became part of a major reshaping of ideology about work organization and leisure. These changes are inextricably linked to transformations in the work process, which had been experimented with for some years and really took hold in U.S. industry in the teens and twenties. The object of these changes was greater control of the production process, increased worker productivity and, of course, greater profits. One of the pioneers of this new methodology was Frederick W. Taylor, who in the late 19th century carried on a number of important in-factory experiments designed to perfect greater management control over the worker. The name given to this new study of techniques of worker control was Scientific Management or Taylorism. Its basic strategy was to break down old worker-controlled modes of production and to relocate control of the work process with management. This restructuring of work held the advantage of lower labor costs and a more pliant work force.⁽⁵⁾

Widely applying these techniques to factory and office resulted in making the worker more than ever a cog in a wheel, an appendage to the machine, and a slave of the boss. To offset worker resistance to these intensified labor practices, employers like Henry Ford were forced to offer forms of enhanced compensation such as shorter hours, higher wages and other such benefits. The tremendous increase of productivity, as Ford recognized, easily made up for the increase in compensation.

Chaplin's MODERN TIMES illustrates how Scientific Management or Taylorism controls the industrial worker through assembly line speedups, time clocks, the foreman, and constant surveillance of workers. Once these systems of control were in place the policing of leisure time activities of ordinary people, such as moviegoing, became less important. Indeed movies were praised for the role they played in helping workers recuperate from the strains of work.

To return to the leisure question and the reevaluation of escapism: these new production methods and the strains they induced created pressure for a reappraisal of the stingy leisure ethic propagated by the bourgeoisie throughout the 19th century and into the twentieth. They based their analysis of leisure on certain assumptions about the relations between leisure and productivity. They thought that escapist leisure induced a state of mind that undermined productivity or that leisure expenditures put pressure on wages, contributing to worker discontent and threatening profits. A whole set of assumptions about the negative effects of escapist leisure bolstered this criticism of popular modes of entertainments — assumptions drawn from medicine (bad for

the physical health), psychology (bad for the nerves), sociology (contributed to violence), aesthetics (stunted the ability to appreciate beauty), and theology (warped the soul).

New developments in production and consumption invalidated this analysis. Work discipline now became less a matter of workers' attitudes than of managerial control which was increasingly built into the production process through assembly lines and step-by-step scrutiny by management representatives on the shop floor. The resulting nerve-racking, intensified, dictated labor led to management's reevaluation of escapism. Regular and limited bouts of escape from the real world came to be appreciated for the part they played in worker recuperation.

Thus, one of the first prestigious academics in the U.S. to step forward in defense of Hollywood movies and escapist entertainment in general was Hugo Münsterberg, a Harvard psychologist specializing in the practical application of psychological techniques to industry. Münsterberg in particular took up the problem of selecting the right worker for the right job, developing methods for habituating' the worker to new Taylorist techniques of production. In his *Psychology and Industrial Efficiency* (1913), he set down three main tasks for the industrial psychologist:

“We ask how we can find the men whose mental qualities make them best fitted for the work which they have to do; secondly, under what psychological conditions we can secure the greatest and most satisfactory output of work from every man; and finally, how we can produce most completely the influence on human minds which are desired in the interests of business.”[\(6\)](#)

Münsterberg's efforts won him widespread recognition among the political, corporate and academic elite. According to his daughter, he counted among his admirers and friends such notables as Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, William James and Andrew Carnegie.

This prestigious academic turned his interest to the popular film in 1915, when the medium was still *déclassé*. He spent considerable time gazing at the silent screen, visiting film companies, even becoming a contributing editor to the new Paramount Company's publication, *Paramount Pictographs*. In 1916 he published one of the first lengthy academic defenses of film, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*. A careful reading of *The Photoplay*, however, reveals nothing inconsistent or aberrant in Münsterberg's pathbreaking defense of popular film. Indeed, his film aesthetic remains consistent with his earlier work in industrial psychology, particularly that part of it which sought to find ways in which psychology could "secure the greatest and most satisfactory output of work from every man," and create a climate where the workers identified their interests with that of business.

Before examining Münsterberg's defense of film, a reminder is necessary about the climate of opinion surrounding the movie business

at the time that he connected with it. Just before the war, as new film corporations were consolidating to produce, distribute and exhibit expensive features, efforts were underway to establish federal legislation to regulate the content of the new medium. The main proponents of the restrictive legislation were churchmen, social workers, journalists, educators, and politicians. They wanted new entertainment to reflect traditional cultural values. They criticized film as undermining reality orientation and the kind of self-repression advocated by traditional morality and aesthetics. The movie business needed to revise these ideas about leisure.

In *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*, Münsterberg sets out to counter the moral condemnation of moviegoing, especially the idea that cinematic escapism violated the work ethic, and by extension, national goals, by being so easy to consume. He introduced an aesthetic in opposition to that which most bourgeois critics of the time promoted.

Münsterberg hints that indeed he tied his reevaluation of film to new social and economic imperatives. He wrote,

"We want to study the right of the photoplay, hitherto ignored by esthetics, to be classified as an art in itself under entirely new mental life conditions." (7)

The middle class attack on film held that active and passive mental states formed discrete parts of the human mind, and art must nourish and hone the active ones. As a psychologist, Münsterberg countered that modern research found these two states closely linked, and that human health depends on the proper functioning of both. Münsterberg began,

"In our daily activity, voluntary and involuntary attention are always intertwined. Our life is a great compromise between that which our voluntary attentions aim at and that which the aims of the surrounding world force on our involuntary attentions." (p. 32)

On the whole, the defense that Münsterberg works out for film, indeed the claim that film is *superior* to theater, rests on his exposition of the medium's unique capacity to bypass voluntary effort — such as thinking, remembering, and physical effort such as eye movement. Film communicates directly with involuntary mental functions. Münsterberg praises such cinematic elements as the close up, flashback, and parallel cutting because they form closer approximations to inner mental processes than the theater can achieve. In a superior way, the film medium more closely resembles the functioning of the human brain. Take Münsterberg's treatment of the flashback. He finds film flashbacks superior to those in theatrical performances, where

"in every important scene we must remember those situations of the preceding act which can throw light on the new developments."

Film's ability to cut rapidly back and forth in time makes it more effortless, more like the natural functioning of the inner mind. The movie close up is similarly superior. It draws the spectator's attention more effortlessly and automatically than the theater can. For example, says Münsterberg, imagine the effect of a gun in the intruder's hand. To appreciate it within the larger frame of the proscenium stage taxes a number of faculties. The motion picture automatically establishes such effects for the viewer:

“The close-up has objectified in our world of perception, our mental act of attention and by it has furnished art with a means which far transcends the power of any theater stage... In both cases, the act which in the ordinary theater would go on in our mind alone is here in the photoplay projected into the pictures themselves. It is as if reality has lost its own emphasis and become shaped by the demands of our soul.”
(p. 38)

Münsterberg, uncomfortable with the passivity of his presumed film spectator, finds movie images perfectly in accord with the inner mechanics of the human brain, as if some kind of link existed between the audience's mode of seeing and the choices made by the filmmaker.

Münsterberg roots his defense of film in the same reactionary view of human nature evident in his industrial psychology. This becomes clear in how he analyzes escapism's benefits. Münsterberg tells how to gauge aesthetic quality by the degree to which it removes the participant from the real world. He observes:

“The highest art may be the furthest removed from reality. An object becomes beautiful when it is delivered from these ties (with the real world) and in order to secure this result we must take it away from the background of reality and reproduce it in such a form that it is unmistakably different from the real things which are *enchained by the causes and effects of nature*.” (p. 65)

As he discusses the social uses of cinema in "The Function of the Photoplay," Münsterberg reveals the ideological basis of his aesthetic. He supports film because of its ability to remove the viewer from the real world, its capacity to provide a vital interval of relaxation. This escape has great social utility, according to Münsterberg, since it helps compensate for life's inherent shortcomings. He argues that we find our highest moments not in life but in art:

“Life is a continuous striving... nothing is an end in itself and therefore nothing is a source of complete rest. Everything is a stimulus to new wishes, a source of new uneasiness which longs for new satisfaction in the next and again the next thing.”

Movies provide a superior, not an inferior, art form in that they

facilitate, better than more established arts, an escape from reality through their interplay with less-than-conscious mind states. Thus he finds moral or political suasion inappropriate for art.

“As long as we have the desire to change anything, the work is not complete in itself. The relation of the work to us as persons must not enter into our awareness of it at all. As soon as it does, the *complete restfulness* [my emphasis] of the aesthetic enjoyment is lost.” (p. 95)

Why is this desirable? The experience of the film helps reinvigorate the spectator, it helps him to recuperate from draining, unsatisfying life, and to be better prepared to reenter the fray. The ultimate function of the photoplay is that it

“heightens the feelings of vitality in the spectator: He [sic] feels as if he were passing through life with a sharper accent which stirs his personal energies ... The massive outer world has lost its weight, it has been freed from space, time and causality.”

While Münsterberg gives *The Photoplay* the appearance of a scientific, objective aesthetic treatise, another contribution to the art-for-art's sake controversy, he clearly does much more, as we can see from his direct relation with the film business. At this time movie producers were discovering the incompatibility between profits and traditional cultural and political goals, which various groups were trying to impose on film. Münsterberg's name lent respectability to the industry. (His book, according to the film historian Terry Ramsaye, "was of decided service in its period by way of indicating to the intelligentsia that the lowly motion picture was worthy of attention.") Beyond that, he gave the industry a theoretical foundation for the aggressive promotion of the film as an escapist entertainment. While one wouldn't want to claim too much for one academic's influence on corporate thinking, the defense put forward by the industry in subsequent years followed his approach. In response to the question, "Have the Movie Ideals?", for example, in 1918 a movie executive candidly admitted in *The Forum*, a high-brow magazine:

“A great deal of money has been lost by men who have a fancy to demonstrate the public love of ideals. I am convinced that... the preacher, the critic, and the reformer can never receive the rewards of their labor. It has been necessary to refer to the amusement business as a whole to define the particular ideals that are possible in the motion picture business.”

Münsterberg's pathbreaking *The Photoplay* contributed to a new blueprint for leisure control, a complement to his work in industrial psychology on worker control. It lauded the ability of the film to uproot the viewer from the real world and transport her or him into a dream world where objective factors did not intrude. The splendid thing about

the movies, "this fountain-like spray of pictures," was not that they heightened the viewer's consciousness of the world but, on the contrary, that they helped "overcome the causal world." Münsterberg predicted that the movies "more than any other art" were "destined to overcome outer nature by the free and joyful play of the mind." (p. 69) At a time when established schools of cultural criticism, still operating under the idea that separation from reality cut into social and productive relations, expressed shock at the opium-like stupor induced by movies, Münsterberg, in a better position to know about new work imperatives, instructed them in the stupor's beneficiality.

In June 1919, in an article called "The Breadline and the Movies," in *The Dial*, the radical sociologist Thorstein Veblen published a slashing attack on the movie business, an attack which can be seen as a rejoinder to the Münsterberg position on movies' social role. Veblen said that the movie industry had become an instrument of bourgeois social control similar to Imperial Rome's "bread and circuses." Veblen wrote that in modern times,

"the mechanical appliances for preserving law and order have been greatly perfected, and by suitable fiscal methods the underlying population which is to be 'kept in hand' can be induced to pay for these mechanical appliances by which they are to be kept in hand."

While the bread and circuses once cut into the profits of the

"vested interests, ... the movies of the twentieth century are business propositions of their own right, a source of 'earnings' and a vested interest. And in the ordinary times of peace or war the movies supply what appears to be required in the way of politically statutory dissipation. Yet in time of stress, as is now evident [1919 was a year of considerable domestic turmoil] something more enticing may be required to distract popular attention securely and keep the underlying population from taking stock of the statesman's promises and performances. At a critical juncture, when large chances of profit and loss for the vested interests are in the balance, it may be well to take thought and add something to the workday routine of the movies, even at some expense."

Veblen probably had in mind the gaudy, exotic spectacles coming from directors like DeMille. At any rate, in the twenties, defenders of the Hollywood style, moving beyond Münsterberg's cautious academic defense of the escapist film, would approve the film industry on the very grounds on which Veblen condemned it. They saw it as necessary and proper that movies help obfuscate painful disparities in the class system, assist in disciplining consumers in ways pleasing to commodity producers and retailers, and alleviate mental and psychological disorders arising from modern industrial life.

In the post-WWI years a growing circle of "opinion makers," journalists, businessmen, film industry publicists, politicians and academics, assumed this view of the Hollywood film: Movies offered an antidote to the damaging effects of work and modern industrial life. One such defense, published by a Dr. George Humphrey (identified as a "university psychologist") in the May 24, 1924, issue of *Harper's Weekly*, argued that movies soothed the raw nerves of the modern businessman and factory worker. In answer to the question, "Is escape good or harmful?" he responded:

"As an escape from the straight-jacket of logic, of business, or workaday habit, the motion picture is probably of great help to the average man, provided that he does not abuse it ... for this reason many doctors prescribe a hobby, and the movies are the greatest and most democratic hobby in the world."

The idea that escapist entertainment and getting-away-from-it-all became natural and inevitable under modern capitalism went hand-in-hand with the observations about the immutability of economic and social conditions. Escapism, as Humphrey phrased it, allowed a

"parole from the wall of inhibitions, the prison of everyday life ... nothing else that does the same thing is so cheap, so easily accessible, and productive of so little real harm."

Since presumably workers had no other alternatives, to critique escapist leisure in the old way now seemed perverse. The movie business pushed this line hard in the twenties. A typical trade journal article, "Robbing the Poor of Happiness," figured that

"91% of all so-called reform legislation in this country is devised for the express purpose of taking joy and happiness out of the poor man's life."

The industry found support for this view not only among psychologists, but from the psychoanalytic community as well. The consumer goods sector in the twenties frequently exploited Freudianism, or a mangled version of it, to support cutting loose and spending. Indeed, in the twenties the motion picture producers got one of Freud's followers, Dr. A.A. Brill, to testify against tough federal censorship legislation. Brill told a Congressional hearing that people demanding restriction and control of amusements showed "certain pathological traits to the extent of bordering on real paranoia" as they demonstrate "an apparent great moral fervor and are always discovering things, especially in the field of sex and crime, which they claim will ruin society." [\(8\)](#)

Let us return to the pro-Hollywood argument that films helped offset and regulate ailments generated by social and economic conditions. Fatalism always lies close to the surface of this approach. Iris Barry, in her 1926 encomium on the Hollywood film, *Let's Go to the Movies*, wrote without embarrassment:

"We come out of the pictures soothed and drugged like sleepwalkers ... having half-forgotten our own existence, hardly knowing our own names."

Barry sanctioned this narcoticized state because

"life has become so circumscribed ... the easiest way to get out of oneself is vicariously, by seeing others having emotions and so getting them second-hand." [\(9\)](#)

Taking a more cynical line, another author observed that

"one could not imagine a more effective, a more economical and a surer way to instructing the masses and filling their humdrum, hopeless and pitiless existence with joy, than the motion pictures." [\(10\)](#)

In the twenties, the official social philosophy disseminated by Hollywood in its advertising and corporate propaganda (and implied in its films) also emphasized that life was ephemeral and rotten. The only hope of release came from surrendering oneself to the cool dark of the movie house with its transporting luminescences. This blatantly reactionary outlook even became physically imprinted on the theaters. Engraved in stone on the walls of a Brooklyn movie palace, for example, were the phrases (in Latin): *Life is Short, Times Flies, Seize the Day* (meaning go to a movie). A typical *Saturday Evening Post* movie ad offered the following prescription for life's ills:

"Go to a motion picture ... and let yourself go ... before you know it you are living the story — laughing, loving, hating, struggling, winning! All the adventures, all the romance, all the excitement you lack in your daily life are in — Pictures. They take you completely out of yourself into a wonderful new world ... Out of the cage of everyday existence! If only for an afternoon or an evening — escape it." [\(11\)](#)

To document the social utility of the film, its antidote to alienation, the movie industry sponsored a contest in the twenties in which the filmgoer would write on the topic, "What the Motion Picture Means to Me." The winning entries selected by the industry show how the movie business wanted to promote film's merits for "cooling-out" discontent, in this case by supplying ersatz access to wealth and adventure. The second place winner in this contest, a Mrs. Lawrence Wood of Texas, wrote:

"The movies are practically my only recreation and are no small factor in securing the happiness which is necessary to my well being ... an evening at a good motion picture theater seems to make up somewhat the deficit caused by lack of wealth ... the romantic situation, the glamour seems to help me hold the tenderness and love for my husband that are usually lost when a man and a woman think only of getting ahead and making money." [\(12\)](#)

Another contest winner, Mr. C. Westerman of Breckenridge, Colorado, confessed that before he discovered the movies,

"I had only my books, and it was lonely always reading, never going about with other folks. Now, however, my world has changed."

A number of academic analyses of film's impact, undertaken in the twenties and thirties, supported the idea that movies could relieve work- and economy-related disorders. In several articles published in a review of the motion picture's impact on society in a 1926 edition of *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, film was seen as a form of public service. One author, the publisher of the Nebraska Farmer, wrote of movies' benefits:

"Greatest of all ... is the fact that the moving picture brings recreation from the humdrum life of the farm. Tired men and tired women may slip into the moving picture theater and find relief from the worries and trials of everyday life. The house is darkened, and instantly the spectators are transferred to a land of romance. It is a fact that people live the pictures they see."

Elsewhere a social worker, *urging that Hollywood films be shown by social agencies*, wrote:

"You know why most people go to the motion pictures is to escape the truth. The desire to escape facts is the big thing ... the reason why they need the highly spiced stuff is that they are trying to forget something so deeply grinding in the factory, so discouraging in the home. Show me a film that appeals to the big audience and I will show you the rough stuff. By that I mean the cheap stuff."

And Samuel Gompers, the conservative labor leader, asserted in 1919 (again, a year when disenchantment with wages and working conditions was leading to widespread labor violence and striking) that his union, the American Federation of Labor,

"recognized that the motion picture presents an opportunity for the worker in the small mining town and other industrial communities to get out of his environment and to enjoy a wider field of vision, at least by proxy."

Many members of the political and economic elite decided to support, rather than interfere with Hollywood practices, because of film's role in transforming, to use Harry Braverman's words, "all of society into a gigantic marketplace." Promoting consumption became a conscious strategy within the movie business, indeed a necessary and logical part of its development. The record shows that important centers of economic and political power widely appreciated this function.

Film's role in training and directing consumers was also hailed in a number of the 1926 *Annals* articles which sought to show that the movie business provided a major stimulus to trade. One author wrote:

“The motion pictures are bettering living conditions everywhere, especially in the small towns and on the farms. No longer does the girl in the rural community guess as to what styles are going to be in three months. She knows because she sees them on the screen. She realizes that the designers of gowns in motion pictures are among the greatest in the world, that their information from fashion centers is correct and always ahead of the time.”

Another author felt that movies were

“proving a considerable force in helping to arouse on the part of 60 the buying public a desire for the many types of products most commonly shown on the screen. An obvious example of this is the 'fashion show, a long and elaborate sequence showing the latest styles on living models, but forming an integral part of the picture ... furniture of all kinds, automobiles, and a variety of other products, are particularly aided through their use in motion picture scenes.”

The Motion Picture, a “study” produced by the film industry, quoted Julia Adams as she wrote in *The Gift and Art Shop*:

“Some day one is going to make a real study of the influence of the screen drama on the clothing and customs of the nation and people. You go to the movies to be amused, of course, but consciously or unconsciously we are always swayed in our choice of what we wear and how we wear it by what we see worn by our favorite star.”

The sociologist Herbert Blumer did undertake such a study in the early thirties. Published as *Movies and Conduct*, it was one of a series of books on the effects of the film sponsored by The Payne Fund for the Motion Picture Research Council. The Payne Fund studies were not pro-Hollywood, but Blumer's book provides similar evidence of the movies' role in promoting consumption. One college girl wrote:

“The day-dreams instigated by the movies consist of clothes, ideas on furnishings, and manners. I don't day-dream much. I am more concerned with materialistic things and realisms. Nevertheless it is hard for any girl not to imagine herself cuddled up in some voluptuous ermine wrap.”

And a high school boy of 17:

“Several times on seeing big, beautiful cars which looked to be bubbling over with power and speed, I dreamed of having

a car more powerful and speedier than all the rest. I saw this car driven by myself up to the girl friend's door and taking her for a ride."

The medium's unique ability to situate the observer in breathtaking proximity to the commodity was also one of the features applauded by Iris Barry. "Chairs, tables, collar studs, kitchen ware and flowers," she noted, "take on a function which they have lost, save for the young children."

Most observers continued to assert that the commodity-laden plots and materialistic values of films simply expressed the audience's values. They passed over the coercive aspects of films, their ideological nature. Like Münsterberg and trade propaganda, they assumed that the movie view of society stayed mystically attuned to the wants and desires of the audience. As Iris Barry wrote,

"What it is that affects us most in American films is their acceptance of a mechanical civilization, their pride and delight in motor cars, typewriters, lifts, skyscrapers, traffic, and above all, speed."

Margaret Thorpe, in her late 30s book, *America at the Movies*, published by Yale University Press, observed:

"Everybody was interested in ways of spending money. The new rich, whether they counted their income in hundreds, or in thousands, wanted to know all about high-powered cars, airplanes, ocean liners, yachts, perfect servants; and DeMille told them. His were really the first educational films."

While of the opinion that these values "are not altogether rational," Thorpe concludes,

"The movies did not impose it on her [the housewife]: they have merely expertly materialized the Platonic shadows of her desires."

While some critics worried about the backlash of unfulfilled expectations encouraged by the movies (one sociologist predicted that problems would arise "when the mechanic learns and tries to use the banker's measure; when the neutral sales girl apes her more favored sister of the screen, ... when the tired housewife in her hot smelly kitchen envies the indolent, much-servented society matron, etc."), many observers argued the opposite: *pseudo-consumption*, the poor's vicarious identification with the lifestyle of the wealthy, their regular visual devouring of unattainable experiences, could lessen individual dissatisfaction — and by implication possible social disorder. Cinema's escapism had an internal ideological content: it was not idle or inert escapism but escapism promoting consumption as escapism in general. Pseudo-consumption seemed an answer to poverty and economic immobility. The movies consciously promoted this in their

advertisements, as we have seen. Many critics agreed. In praising the lush DeMille high life features, Iris Barry wrote:

"The films flatter these dreams [of wealth, etc.] and make the poor inhabit marble halls for a few hours."

Thorpe concurred on pseudo-consumption's social benefits:

"The adult female goes to the movies as she reads luxury advertising so that she may be familiar with the ultimate in Fisher bodies and sable coats ... the movies are far more satisfying than the advertisement. They give her an illusion, as she identifies herself with the heroine of the afternoon, that she is enjoying elegances she may never experience in the flesh."

In response to those who argued that the movies warped the nation's values, the movie business invariably resorted to its democracy-of-the-box-office argument. As one movie publicist wrote, answering criticism about "gross exaggerations" and lack of realism in movies,

"The inveterate movie fan had progressed far in the opposite direction. He expects these exaggerations, is not disturbed by their disproportion, and in fact demands them, if we are to believe the makers of the motion pictures."

The U.S. political and economic elite increasingly appreciated film's role in helping shape values and manners useful to capitalism and expressed this approval by rejecting proposals to control the industry through federal censorship or stringent anti-trust enforcement. As we have seen, Hollywood made its first links with the executive branch of government during Wilson's Presidency. Managed by Will Hays, these links expanded and became vital to the producers in the twenties. Hollywood also vigorously lobbied state and national legislators, and sought the support of important figures from industry and finance as well. It added to its payroll major literary figures and helped feed an army of publicists and promoters. Even Henry Ford felt compelled to admit that the movies, in conjunction with his automobile and good roads, had helped revive life in rural United States. Calvin Coolidge more explicitly acknowledged their broad economic importance. According to *The New York Times* of April 21, 1926,

"President Coolidge is disposed to leave the censorship of films to States rather than favor the proposed Federal Censorship... In his opinion, the American films have been of great advantage in bringing our life and customs before the world. The President also thinks they have aided in our trade relations and produced a better understanding among nations."

Notes

- [1.](#) Citations from William DeMille's correspondence come from letters found in Columbia University's Manuscript Collection.
- [2.](#) William DeMille, "Great Pictures and the Men Who Made Them," typescript, CUMC.
- [3.](#) William DeMille to Brander Mathews, March 20, 1916, CUMC. Mathews expressed his reservations the following year in an article, "Are the Movie a Menace to Drama," published in the *North American Review*. See Henry May, *The End of American Innocence* (Chicago, 1964), 334-336.
- [4.](#) William DeMille, "Bigoted but Better Pictures," *Scribner's*, September 1924.
- [5.](#) For more on the effect of Scientific Management on work, see Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974).
- [6.](#) Quoted in Braverman, 143.
- [7.](#) Hugo Münsterberg, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1916); reprint (New York: Dover Press, 1970), p. 17.
- [8.](#) Quoted in "The Wowsers Tackle the Movies," *The American Mercury*, November 28, 1925. See also Stewart Ewin, *Captains of Consciousness* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1976), p. 83 and following.
- [9.](#) Iris Barry, *Let's Go to the Movies* (London: Payson and Clark, 1926), 66.
- [10.](#) Herbert Sherwood, "Democracy and the Movies," *The Bookman*, May 1918.
- [11.](#) Helen and Robert Lynd, *Middletown* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956), 265.
- [12.](#) "What the Motion Picture Means to Me," pamphlet (New York, 1926), possibly published by the movie industry's National Board of Review. Found in the files of the National Board of Review, Film Book Collection, Lincoln Center Library of the Performing Arts, New York.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

6 x 2

A good use of television

by Jean Collet

translated by Dana Polan

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Machine noises. On the screen we see a video recorder control panel. Someone's hand inserts a cassette. No, not just anyone's hand. We must read the image. This is a transmission by Anne-Marie Miéville and Jean-Luc Godard. Clic-clac. The machine's contacts slap into operation. It's begun.

This summer we saw these credits 24 times [1976]. At the beginning and end of 12 transmissions — 6 X 2 — directed by Godard and his Grenoble production team for French Channel 3 (FR3).

"On television, Guy Lux never tells you how TV does things. Nor does Marchais. Nor Sylvie Vartan⁽¹⁾ ... A TV screen is just a blank slate to inscribe things on. If they can be inscribed, they can also be criticized. However, when and if people remain blind to the nature of this inscription, things go much better and smoother."

Six programs, each an hour and 40 minutes long, a production six times the length of a fiction film.⁽²⁾ For several vacation Sundays, it became a matter of allowing time. Stopping television. Or, to be more precise, slowing it down. To return to zero. To try to understand what's going on. Basically, it's very simple. Childish. It is this simplicity in Godard, this total openness, this extreme modesty, which has brought out so much critical anger and misunderstanding. So, in contrast, we must take our time.⁽³⁾

THEORY AND PRACTICE

Maybe we have to begin with ourselves in order to talk about this new use for television. What do we fundamentally expect from the little screen? What habits have we formed since the advent of TV? How have our likes and dislikes been formed? Because it's in these areas that Godard initially confronts us. We normally expect a certain violence from images. At all costs, the montage has to impose its rhythm. Quickly, quickly, always more quickly. One only has to look at commercials, which serve as a paradigm for all TV. The message must take us by surprise; it must assault us. Each moment, a new surprise, a new bit of "information." There is never an opportunity to backtrack, to look things over, to take stock of things. Each message pushes out the one before it: this is the law of televisual discourse. Its sole function. The golden rule which applies equally to what we call news as to fictional programs. Spectacle is everywhere. Spectacle — the banning of a multitude of elements judged to be useless, uninteresting, parasitic. The image factory produces television just as other enterprises produce candied fruit. One picks the fruit, removes the pits, covers the fruit with sugar, and cooks it. Godard proposes that we, who are no more than amateurs when it comes to making candied fruit, should go out and take a stroll through the orchards. We should do our own picking, experiencing the odor and taste for ourselves, feeling our own fatigue and our own pain. We must sample the fruit at its source. No more candied substitutes. The raw against the cooked.(4)

This image is not completely appropriate, because there is a different and specific motif which governs Godard's series. The series is entirely devoted to communication. "On and inside communication," Godard announced. We had taken this as some sort of joke, but with Godard there are no insignificant jokes. With him, it is useless to search for extra difficulties where there are none. We must simply listen to what is said. Each Sunday evening, we saw two programs. The first, more composed, more constructed, more didactic, was on communication. The second, dealing with various people, made us live this communication. To enter into the action. To meet someone (all these latter programs had people's first names as their titles). Thus, between first and second program, there was the opposition of outside and inside, of theoretical exposition (the "on" communication) and lived speech (the "inside" communication). These pairs of programs were as follows:

1. *Y A PERSONNE (SOMEBODY) — LOUISON*
2. *LEÇONS DE CHOSES (LESSONS IN THINGS) — JEAN-LUC*
3. *PHOTOS ET CIE (PHOTOS AND INDUSTRY) — MARCEL*
4. *PAS D'HISTOIRE (NO STORY) — NANAS*
5. *NOUS TROIS (WE THREE) — RENÉ*
6. *AVANT ET APRÈS (BEFORE AND AFTER)*
— JACQUELINE AND LUDOVIC(5)

WHAT'S BETWEEN THE TWO ...

So what is it, this collection of programs? Fiction? Instruction?

Interviews? Portraits? Sketches? By themselves, none of these categories captures the truth of the matter. Godard's television is all of these things *at one and the same time*. And still something else. It is impossible to classify these programs in any particular genre. Yet this is precisely what some critics have felt obliged to do.

"He [Godard] has made a series of TV shows which challenge like an anti-cleric from the Third Republic, like Rousseau distributing apples and marbles to demonstrate equality to the children in his part of town ... He writes, he analyzes, he ruminates on the screen: me/ you/ the other/ the others. He has done wonderfully. He has created educational TV."

This doesn't prevent this critic, Catherine B. Clement, from noting a little later on,

"When René speaks about geometry, the schoolboy screen writes this as 'J'ai oh métrie'[\(6\)](#) as if it were tired of the whole activity."[\(7\)](#)

So we have to ask: Is Godard a professor, or just a bad student? He's both, and it's this back-and-forth play between the two — this obstinate effort to break down the codes of communication, or, at least, to overturn them, to displace them, to ceaselessly disturb them — which angers, irritates, and certainly leaves no one indifferent.

To clarify this, I would suggest that most of our activities function on the basis of a binary code: serious/ frivolous; sad/ happy; laborious/ diverting; comic/ dramatic; etc. This logic, which is the logic of language, determines our judgments. It fixes our reference points, our values. It divides up our reality which we try to express through words.[\(8\)](#) Godard's discourse is held within this logic, as is everyone's discourse. But while we glide tranquilly inside this binary prison-house of language (at the risk of losing a great part of reality, of rejecting one aspect for another, of excluding, of becoming fixed), Godard fights back. He adopts an attitude of resistance. Like us — and more clearly than most of us — he makes use of the binary code (it is enough to watch the series to have many examples of this) as he tries to subvert this code, to transgress it, to transcend it. He is a destroyer of paradigms. For example, he takes up a position between work and entertainment. We want TV to be amusing, fascinating, charming (especially on Sunday evening and, even more so, on a Sunday evening in August). However, we find ourselves in front of a prof who gives a course and yet isn't a prof. A malicious master. A teacher who is taught,[\(9\)](#) professor and jokester, serious and flippant.

"On paper, the little word and can bring together Marx and Nietzsche. Television is located between factory and home."[\(10\)](#)

We could even say that each of the six composed programs has as its objective to explode a specific paradigm. And also, in the same

movement, to explode the spectator and his/her intellectual comfort: Y A PERSONNE subverted the opposition between *work* and *play*. Unemployed workers, answering an ad placed by Godard, showed up at Godard's office. Playing a boss, Godard (off-screen) greeted them and proposed a different kind of work for them: speaking on television and acting out the gestures of their trade for the television viewers.

LEÇONS DE CHOSES broke down the opposition between *defining* and *changing*. Showing objects on the screen, the program named them but in new ways. A child became a political prisoner. He appeared behind bars in the school hallway. A river became a long story. A factory assembly line became a porno film. There were gestures without feeling:

"You must understand that this is not what people usually think is going on ... What's important is in between. Elsewhere. Here."

Always, the same wish to oppose and to conjugate. To uncover the secret behind this and, behind this conjunction which connects without mixing, which unites while maintaining distance. The secret of communication. Yes, this makes us laugh — this naive research. This need to displace, to condense words and things. But it also bothers us. We feel something touch us at the very roots of all our thought processes, all our mental activity. Healthy or insane? *Between* the two. That's what so disturbs us. Godard — always the poet — is more the poet than ever.

FROM OPPOSITION TO ANALOGY

SNAPSHOTS AND INDUSTRY: This is the opposition between *professional* and *amateur*. An opposition subverted once again. The tourist pays to photograph Indians. But the reporter — in terms of his job as reporter — wins a prize for having photographed the condemned, those about to be executed. Paradoxes of an insensitive economy, perversion of exchange.

PAS D'HISTOIRE. Here a confrontation of all sorts of stories. Written stories, spoken stories, drawn stories. But always, the stories of men, an adult language, the word of the Father which he imposes on the child with the force of Law. The opposition in effect here is that of the *infant* — infans, one who does not yet possess language — and that of the *adult*. A Lacanian psychoanalyst would call it the opposition between the *imaginary* and the *symbolic*. Godard invites us to meditate for a long time on images of a baby with its mother. Desire (the baby's, the mother's) is the desire for an impossible fusion. A desire for two to be no more than one. That is the *imaginary*. To contrast this, Godard shows us that love demands a separation, a frontier, a third term. The two must accept the third term, the excluded third which the entire logic of the Occident tries to forget, to deny. This excluded third term is represented on the screen by the Third World. A horrifying metaphor for our voracious love, our false love, as avid as hunger, which sets out to appropriate, when it should try to greet, to meet, to create. The other,

the third, disturbs unity, and allows communication. The other is "between" —

"the one who separates me from others. Because there is a separation, we can go from one to the other. There is communication. There is distance. There is a flow. There is a current." [\(11\)](#)

NOUS TROIS expands this discovery. A prisoner writes to the woman he loves. The film is silent. We see the letters written out on the screen. The faces — he, she, another woman — mix and interweave throughout the course of the writing. What is in opposition here is *speech* and *silence*, *writing* and *voice*. With a provocative audacity, Godard abandons the conventions of modern cinema (speech, synchronization). He films faces that speak, laugh, dream, think. In a silence that takes us back to the birth of the Seventh Art, he employs a mode of writing (*écriture*) — his writing — which unravels slowly.

Here is the film that Bresson always dreamt of doing; it may go even further than Bresson. We are filled with suspense toward these words which we invent as they appear. An elementary suspense, but stronger than that in an action film. Between these faces and these words, there we are, spectators. Actors, creators, creators of the sense. No longer are we voyeurs. We are accomplices. The couple exists only in us, just as they exist only in that prison (from the very first image, Godard plays with the metaphor of the lattice — on the one hand, the bars of the prison; on the other hand, the straight lines on the writing paper). Here love is nourished by the most extreme separation, an irreducible distance. But because there is us, because a third term exists — police, bars, writing, TV — there is *mediation*. Therefore, exchange and communication. An admirable poem — one of the most sublime moments in Godard's cinema. The poignant beauty of silent faces. One thinks of Carl Dreyer, of VIVRE SA VIE (MY LIFE TO LIVE, Godard, 1962), of LE PETIT SOLDAT (THE LITTLE SOLDIER, Godard, 1963). Even under torture — as in Dreyer's PASSION OF JOAN OF ARC (1927) or DAY OF WRATH (1943) — something essential, something invincible, triumphs — something which expresses itself in silence. The spirit of childhood. The soul — malicious and silenced, inflexible and tender.

Finally, the last film, AVANT ET APRÈS, serving as a summation of the series, is based on the opposition of *author* (*auteur*) and *interpreter*. A young man, headphones over his ears, recites a text that Godard whispers to him. The process seems strange, and even insulting to the spectator, since it goes on for almost 45 minutes in one fixed shot. We would have preferred that Godard speak directly to us. But this *intermediary*, this double — who in a disturbing way manages to capture the author's intonations, accent, and delivery — is the very image of television. He is the medium, the mediator, between one who has something to say and we who listen. Between Godard and us, there's this young man. But there is still much more: the TV technology that we

never see. What exactly does Godard say through this young man? He speaks to us of the images of these programs, produced at Grenoble, but decoded, transcoded, reduced, in Paris. To speak to his working-class neighbors in Grenoble by means of TV, he has to send his images to Paris. The image needs a SECAM permit.[\(12\)](#) In order to reach us, an artisanal form of TV, stuttering like a child, has to use Parisian TV — a centralized, "Napoleonic," imperialist TV. We are used to supporting this sort of detour. It's habit. But let an actor repeat before our eyes the words of someone dictating words into his headphones, and suddenly we don't do as well. Why?

THE MIRROR AND THE BLANK SLATE

Undoubtedly because Godard's TV underlines it, we notice something which we generally live through without seeing or noticing at all. We are normally in the position of a child to whom the adult says, "Don't pick your nose! Don't drag your feet!" (Significantly, this sort of talk is the object of one of the programs, PAS D'HISTOIRE.) We must come to consciousness about our situation.

But this situation is not explicitly expressed in the program. The form of communication that Godard employs is *analogic*. It's like mimicking a child's comportment in front of the child. There's nothing more irritating than seeing in a mirror that we are something different than we imagined. It's me and not me. It's him and not him. All analogic communication abolishes the frontiers of the self. The actor who speaks for the *auteur* becomes indistinguishable from that *auteur*. All identify is disturbed. The actor's, the *auteur*'s, and, at the same time, ours. The "self" is subverted.[\(13\)](#)

Thus, Godard explores the two major forms of all communication: the *binary* (also called the "digital") and the *analogic*. With a virtuosity distressing to us, Godard passes from one form of communication to the other. It is this sort of action which people won't forgive him for. Our civilization emphasizes binary communication, the logic of language, a "semio-logic" which puts terms into opposition: white and black; good and bad; you and me; inside and outside; etc.. As for analogic communication, it serves as a captivating staple of cinema and TV — as long as it doesn't violate the precise limits of "spectacle." Like dreams, analogic communication constitutes an island of delicious regression. Yet analogic communication still remains under the control of a binary system: cinema isn't life, isn't a dream, isn't reality. To oppose this, all of Godard's effort has tried to allow one domain to break out of the other's control (this is exactly what the Surrealists vowed to do).

Godard doesn't choose between a photo (analogic) and a text (binary). He makes the photo and the text confront each other. (This is the subject of the third program, PHOTO ET CIE. Its also the theme of his film, COMMENT ÇA VA? (1976), in which he asks how a press photo from Portugal can be turned into a mythic object.) This is why, according to Godard, the TV screen is *simultaneously* a mirror which reflects the spectacle of things and a blank slate where the enunciation

of things can be inscribed (fifth program, NOUS TROIS). The screen is no longer this place of fascination, this mirror of delights, where we can take hold of ourselves. Godard's screen oscillates between fascination and *reflection*.⁽¹⁴⁾ This word appears so often during the program that it could well be symptomatic. Commenting on the photo, two words mix: *reflex* — *reflection*. In other words, a passage from image to consciousness, from image to symbol. And a return to the image in a ceaseless motion. Because, contrary to the tacit law which governs exchange in our society, there is no justification in privileging one term while excluding the other. There is no symbol without image, no consciousness without mirror. Within reflection, there is first of all a "reflex."

So it is astonishing that this approach to communication has elicited so much anger (yet as soon as one works in the area of communication, one quickly realizes that it is particularly difficult to communicate — about communication, to find an adequate meta-language). For *Le Monde*,

"If one learns from Godard, borrowing from Mao, that 'one divides into two,' that comes down to more than a strictly binary opposition, a dialectic. No third term, no transcendence, no overcoming. No escape. It's like Scholastic metaphysics..."⁽¹⁵⁾

In order to bring about a radical form of counter-sense, these emissions obviously have "something" capable of troubling the most lucid minds. But what is this "something"?

MADNESS WITHOUT A DEFINITION

Take, for example, the second series, which prolongs each "composed" program. The rules of the game consist in giving speech to someone (or several people). For once, let us start at the end of the series. On the last evening, you could see a talkative young woman and a man who never spoke (JACQUELINE ET LUDOVIC). Here Godard alternates long sequences one after the other. It's the only montage that he uses. And again, each cut is underlined by two words inscribed on the screen: *speech* — *silence*. It couldn't be clearer. Then, Godard converses with her, and then with him. The same austere shot for each of them: a fixed, medium shot of the person seated near an empty bookshelf. Evidently, television, a grand image devourer, has habituated us to "more" visual satisfaction. When Jacqueline speaks, one can at least find contentment by listening to the soundtrack. She talks of her repeated attempts to have a private audience with the Pope. We are intrigued. Little by little, we realize that this woman is going mad before our eyes. She finally reveals her dearest desire: to marry Paul VI, to call herself Madame Montini, to abstain from sexual relations, to manufacture counterfeit money. She declares with the jubilant air of a discoverer,

"At the Vatican, one can do that. Everything is acceptable when it's a question of putting an end to suffering."

Mental illness — since this is what is in question here — only has one place assigned to it in our societies: the asylum. It has to hide itself. Never — until now — has television allowed it to enter our homes, without labeling it, without declaring it to be madness. What this new program lacks is a moderator, a specialist, who would *interpret*, make sense of the illness. The interpreter who was also present earlier (the young man who stood in for Godard in AVANT ET APRÈS) is now absent. Certainly, the mentally ill aren't presented without any mediation. Godard, invisible, asks questions. (16) But this absent mediator — only his voice is present — makes a point of not controlling what happens, what we should think or do. He can allow interminable silences without breaking in. Thus, he is not on our side, he doesn't play our game. Instead of establishing the distance which would allow us to grasp madness, to accept its difference — its otherness ("I am going to show you this case ..."), he works to bring us closer to it, to efface the difference. At the end of the program, this becomes very clear: when Ludovic, the schizophrenic, tells how he locks his door three times before going to sleep, Godard sets out to beat his record:

"Me, I do it twelve times, and I don't have to go to the hospital for that."

The madperson is not the other — he/she isn't the object of a study, of a commentary, of an exposé. The madperson is Godard, is the other, is me. There is no more question of educational television, of didacticism. The mediator tries to place us in front of an unbearable mirror.

CODE, RELATION, DESIRE

In contrast to normal practices, when a journalist from *Libération* (17) interviews a certain JEAN-LUC (Godard), the journalist is very much present in the image. Too present, since from the opening shot he is shown from behind, and from time to time his silhouette obscures Jean-Luc's face. The TV viewer will soon understand the obvious error of commentators on the programs. Even the network indicted itself in the way it presented the series (this time, the mediator, the moderator, was there, and maybe too much there):

"The broadcasts do not present the standard technical characteristics of our programs. But the very method of presentation is part of the experiment attempted by Godard's audio-visual group. This is why, with such an experiment, we didn't want to be strict about technical quality."

In the past, the first experiments of Cubism, Surrealism, even Impressionism, were introduced similarly. As errors in technique. Woe to those who tried to meddle with the code of communication. Yet this is precisely what Godard is up to. He is not content to change the *subject matter* of television: to simply allow a madperson, a peasant, children, a prostitute, an old woman, to speak. He changes *our relation* to these people. Consequently, he changes the code that allows us to communicate with them. Here he demonstrates that he is at the head of

a revolution — at the very least, a revolution in the strategies of mass communication. This is so because the true subversion is not that of allowing a marginal figure to speak on TV *in place of* a minister. Jacques Chancel (18) can do that himself. The true subversion is to change the place of the one who speaks. And, in the same action, the one who listens. I can't listen to Ludovic or Jacqueline as I normally listen to Edmond Maire, Poniowski, or Mireille Mathieu on TV. (19) Each of these personalities comes to me as a celebrity, a role. The moderator who introduces them has the precise function of defining this role, pinpointing it. That's what Jacques Chancel does at the beginning of each *Radioscopie*. The emcee is like a hat put on the celebrity to define him or her. Or better yet, a hairstyle, since the emcee gives a coiffeur to the celebrity, which designates him or her, provides a label, an identity. In the same way, the condemned, the crucified, were exposed to the crowds of Roman antiquity.

Too much or too little labeling, too much or too little mediation. Through this excess or this lack, the subject of communication is displaced. There's no longer Jacqueline, the crazy person, or Louison, the peasant, or Jean-Luc, the filmmaker. There's Jacqueline *and* speech, Ludovic and silence, Jean-Luc *and* the difficulty of communication. A light falls on what is usually kept in the shadows: the apparatus that puts us in contact with our equals so close and so far away. The code is spotlit; it becomes an object we can seize (ordinarily, the code, as Law, is a hidden power, yet one no one can ignore). (20)

When the TV viewer is put in the presence of a "madperson" — one not "wearing a hat" — that viewer will have the feeling that someone's playing a very bad joke. He or she will be angry at Godard (moreover, we will declare that the filmmaker is making fun of himself, not of us). But when Jacqueline's discourse is interrupted to make way for Ludovic's, we must recognize that we've been tricked. Our aggressivity marks the ambivalence of our desire; we do and don't want to communicate with Jacqueline. Yet Ludovic doesn't speak. The camera holds on his long silences. Not the slightest ellipsis. Duration becomes overwhelming. The poor spectator is at the mercy of a brusque alternation — speech and silence — no longer knowing what he or she really wants: Jacqueline's speech or Ludovic's silence.

In other words, what we see is not the spectacle of madness: we'd like that. The success of several recent films like *ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST* shows that. But in Godard's film, there is no spectacle. Madness is not re-presented, mediated, enclosed, labeled, coiffeured. What is expressed is our desire. Deep within us, before rationalization sets in, our desire (or our repulsion) holds sway. Desire which impels us toward an other, so like ourselves, and so different. This is so because these two mentally disturbed people resemble us — an inescapable fact. We are caught up by Jacqueline and Ludovic. Jacqueline's story follows an implacable logic. It is as gripping as a novel or a monologue by Alain Decaux (21) on TV. And at some time or another, we have all felt such a fear at being trapped if we speak, and so we can all recognize ourselves

in Ludovic's silence.

THE EYE LISTENS

So is Godard a sadist? Yes, insofar as he never gives us what we expect from television. He deceives us, he diverts our expectations. At every moment, he changes the channels of communication, whether by stretching them out through interminable detours (the manuscript letter in NOUS TROIS) or by provoking short-circuits (the direct contact with madness in JACQUELINE ET LUDOVIC). But by so shaking up our desire, working on it (just as the teacher always directs the student's desire toward new paths of discovery), he unveils a certain perversion of television, of cinema — of audio-visual communication, to be precise. For example, our hunger for images. It seems natural to us that the presence of photos allows us to receive ever larger amounts of visual information. Each filmmaker learns, when filming someone talking, to multiply the shooting angles, to get close ups and longshots, to frame the speaker's face, his or her hands, or profile or mouth or ears, etc.. We are so used to this procedure that we are surprised when Godard offers an hour of interview with a peasant shown through a single shot of the peasant in his field with his tractor. A rupture of the code. An ascesis of the eye. A deception.

And then, little by little, like a blind person learning how to use his or her senses, we learn to listen. Yes, these six programs are astonishing for their vocal beauty. The child who stutters his (sic) way through his schoolbook. Marcel, the amateur filmmaker who energetically sings his words with a countryside accent. The beauty of a voice as rough as the bark of a tree, a voice which one never hears on TV. Convinced that he has a bad voice, Marcel explains that he may add narration to his film.

"If I can find someone with a nice voice ..."

A perversion of the cliché, of the code that excludes all difference, all singularity. It was precisely these singular voices that fascinated us for six weeks. The voice of a mathematician (RENÉ) who speaks like a peasant. The voice of a peasant who spoke like a worker. An unemployed man who gives a weight to each of his words. A housewife who tries to express herself, trembling all the while ("I didn't have enough lesson in elocution," she says, and finishes by singing the "International").

In the end, all these voices become song, in spite of themselves. Godard is the songmaster, the poet who reveals the musician asleep in all of us.

"It's me, a blackbird, my children. And now I've had enough.
It's been me singing, for the whole year, in your neighbor's
garden" (second program: JEAN-LUC).

WORK WITHOUT LOVE

Naive and innocent voices, repressed and suddenly liberated. But also, cheating mercantile voices. We can't forget the long interview with the

reporter who nearly won the Pulitzer Prize for his photograph of an execution, by bayonet, in the stadium in Dacca. For almost a quarter of an hour, he complacently explains reporters' techniques. What is the purpose of this know-how? That's the forbidden question. The professional in whatever field — cineaste, policeman, mercenary, or journalist — is paid never to ask, "What is my work doing? What is the goal and point of my job?" [\(22\)](#) Godard merely has to illustrate this discourse on photography by the photograph the reporter took (for 15 minutes on our TV screen, we see the instantaneity of an execution) in order for us spectators to realize the radical perversity of information systems. No, the program does even more. This man who photographs an ordeal without asking any questions other than technical ones — " (for dramatic effect, you should photograph the same situation in color, and then in black and white ...)" — illustrates what the division of labor does to us.

Exchanges without responsibility ruled by the economy's omnipotence. Each robot in place, each worker at his or her place in a great chain, whose purpose must remain unknown. Godard often returns to this metaphor of the crazy, unseeing chain that is the reverse of good communication. It's a chain in which each individual can actually leave his or her position to become responsible, to gain awareness, to understand the purpose of what he or she is doing.

Godard the poet is therefore also a moralist. With an admirable fidelity to himself, he takes up again, with this parable of the photograph, an old project which he had announced around 1963: The only honest film about concentration camps, said he at the time, would have to show a Kapo overwhelmed with technical problems: how to kill 200 Jews when you only have 50 cans of gas.

"It would be interesting to make a film today on the life of a typist at Auschwitz. Yet the whole world would refuse a film about a typist in Auschwitz." [\(23\)](#)

That's what happened here. [\(24\)](#) Godard was accused of cynicism when he was simply trying to hold up a mirror in front of our own criminal irresponsibility. It's cynicism to communicate without love. In contrast, all of Godard's efforts tried to make us feel this lack of love rather than camouflage it. Or as Jean-Luc said,

"You must not be forced to work without love."

Notes

[1.](#) Guy Lux: popular host of a variety show on French TV for many years.
Georges Marchais: Secretary General of the French Communist Party.
Sylvie Vartan: popular top-40s singer [trans].

[2.](#) Let's hope that these 10 hours of film will be re-seeable in movie theatres.

- [3.](#) "Strikes give the workers time. Time is more important than salary" (second program: JEAN-LUC).
- [4.](#) "This is a reference to anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss's book, *The Raw and the Cooked* [trans].
- [5.](#) Between the first and second shows, there was also the opposition of discourse to meeting. Thus discourse/ personal story. The first two titles announce all the others: first, Y A PERSONNE — SOMEBODY. Then LOUISON — in other words, somebody specific.
- [6.](#) Untranslatable pun signaling a certain breakdown of language [trans].
- [7.](#) Catherine B. Clement, "Devoirs de vacances pour l'examen de communication" ("Vacation Homework for an Examination in Communication"), *Le Monde*, August 20, 1976.
- [8.](#) See Collet's article, "Critique et cinéma vont en bateau" ("Criticism and Cinema Go Boating"), *Etudes*, April 1975.
- [9.](#) "One has to be twisted," Godard told journalists, "to see that as a teacher's discourse. It could as easily be the discourse of a student."
- [10.](#) Sixth transmission: AVANT ET APRÈS.
- [11.](#) Fourth transmission: PAS D'HISTOIRE.
- [12.](#) SECAM: union in charge of freight and maritime transport [trans].
- [13.](#) Untranslatable pun: "le 'je' est en jeu!" [trans].
- [14.](#) "Reflection" here means reflective thinking [trans].
- [15.](#) *Le Monde*, August 29, 1976 (see n. 7).
- [16.](#) Just as he was invisible when the unemployed workers came looking for a job (Y A PERSONNE).
- [17.](#) *Libération*: leftist daily paper [trans].
- [18.](#) Jacques Chancel: popular radio interviewer [trans].
- [19.](#) Edmond Maire: head of France's largest union. Poniatoski: rightist Minister of the Interior. Mireille Mathieu: popular French top 40s singer [trans].
- [20.](#) See the analyses of Jean Baudrillard, *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1972).
- [21.](#) Decaux: popularizing French historian [trans].
- [22.](#) First transmission: Y A PERSONNE.
- [23.](#) *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard*, ed. Jean Narboni (Paris:

Editions Belfond, 1968), p. 367. The quotation comes from 1965.

[24.](#) "The Association of Journalists and Reporters responded with extreme furor to the program, PHOTOS ET CIE" (see *Le Monde*, August 14, 1976).

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Epic theater and the principles of counter-cinema

by Alan Lovell

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Contemporary radical filmmakers and theorists have constructed a political aesthetic out of their response to the work (plays, films, theoretical and critical writings) of Bertolt Brecht and Jean-Luc Godard. This aesthetic identifies art as a form of ideology whose principal function is to make the capitalist social formation seem natural. The convention of Realism is the main instrument for performing this function. As part of its struggle against the naturalization effect, Marxist art has to oppose Realism. To do so it needs to produce an art that is self-reflexive and foregrounds form. Such an art demands active and critical audiences, not the passive ones demanded by Realism.

This political aesthetic emerges out of an analysis of the failure of revolutionary politics in the capitalist countries of Western Europe, the United States, and Japan in the period since the end of the Second World War. The analysis draws on a well-known characterization of these as affluent societies. It argues that capitalism's increased productive capacity over the past thirty years has led to the development of consumption as a major social process. By making available an enormous range of commodities (washing machines, television sets, frozen food, long-playing records, pocket calculators, jogging suits, Kleenex, electric toothbrushes, package vacations, etc.) the mass of people are encouraged to regard themselves as *passive* consumers. Consciousness of their role as active producers is suppressed.

Mass media like cinema and television play a central role in this process. The nature of the cultural commodities they offer (soap operas, variety shows, documentaries, advertisements, news programs, pop music shows, comedy series, feature films) and the framework they are offered in immeasurably adds to people's sense of themselves as consumers not producers.

The analysis is made distinctive when it is joined with Louis Althusser's philosophical account of ideology. The social world is constructed

ideologically around the concept of the subject. People think of themselves as subjects in the active sense of the word, unique centers of consciousness who control their own destiny. In fact, they are subjects in the passive sense, products of a structure which generates their consciousness and controls their destiny.

Brecht and Godard reinforce each other in the formulation of this position, but undoubtedly Brecht is the dominant figure. Much of the attractiveness of the position depends on the way an ideal Brecht has been constructed. This ideal Brecht is all these: a modernist who produces art which reaches a popular audience; an unwavering Marxist who has a skeptical, anti-dogmatic attitude to knowledge; an avant-gardist who values and uses popular art; and a didactic artist who remains an entertainer. In the first part of this essay, I will show that Brecht's work doesn't make all these reconciliations, and that there are confusions and failures which can't be glossed over.

Brecht's concept of Epic Theatre with its basic opposition of two kinds of drama, Aristotelian and Epic, is the starting point of the whole position. Aristotelian drama draws the audience into its representation, encouraging us to accept uncritically the illusion of reality created on the stage. Its method is founded on a tight narrative structure into which the other elements of the drama (music, decor, lighting, acting) "disappear." The method produces a sense of the inevitability of the narrative, of Fate working itself out.

Epic drama keeps its audience at a distance from its representation, encouraging it to be critical of what happens on stage. Its method is founded on a loose narrative structure which is interrupted by titles, films, songs, etc.; an active separating out of the other elements of the drama from the narrative; and a detached style of acting — playing in "quotation marks." This method produces a sense of events which could have happened differently and of a world amenable to change.

"But what has knowledge got to do with art? We know that knowledge can be amusing, but not everything that is amusing belongs in the theatre."

"I have often been told when pointing out the invaluable services that modern knowledge and science, if properly applied, can perform for art and especially for the theater, that art and knowledge are two estimable but wholly distinct fields of human activity. This is a fearful truism, of course, and it is as well to agree quickly that, like most truisms, it is perfectly true. Art and science work in quite different ways: agreed. But bad as it may sound, I have to admit that I cannot get along as an artist without the use of one or two sciences." (*Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. John Willett,

Eyre: Methuen, 1978)

The status of Realism is at the heart of current discussion. Traditionally, Marxist aestheticians have positively valued Realism. There are a number of reasons why this attitude has been reversed. Artistically, the support for Realism is regarded as reactionary, in that it prevents Marxism from coming to terms with modern art and attaches it to outmoded 19th century forms. This has special force at a time when Marxism as a whole is trying to modernize itself and show it's not an outdated 19th century doctrine. Philosophically, Realism implies a superficial and dogmatic position about the way knowledge is acquired and authorized (it is acquired simply by observing the world and then presented authoritatively by disguising the point from which it is acquired).

Epic Theatre is identified as an anti-realist approach. The issue has been further dramatized by contrasting Brecht's position with that of Hungarian Communist Georg Lukács. This contrast has then been presented as a Realist versus anti-Realist debate.

To describe Epic Theatre as anti-Realist is misleading in a way that makes it hard to understand many of Brecht's other ideas. He clearly was opposed to Lukács, but his opposition centered on the character of Realism rather than a rejection of it. Both Brecht and Lukács were realists in the mainstream of traditional Marxist aesthetics. They believed the function of art was to provide knowledge of the real world, that is, a world which exists in a substantial way outside of and independent of the human mind. Their key difference was over how art provided that knowledge.

This difference can be pinpointed by describing Brecht and Lukács' attitude to Naturalism. Lukács was uncompromisingly hostile to Naturalism because of its belief that truth could be arrived at through the observation of appearances. Brecht's hostility was more qualified. Brecht was sympathetic to some aspects of Naturalism:

"The naturalistic drama developed from the bourgeois novel of Zola and Dostoevsky which itself announced the invasion of science into the domains of art. The naturalists (Ibsen, Hauptmann) tried to bring the new subject matter of the new novels onto the stage and found no other form for it except that of the novelists: an epic form." (As Reinhold Grim has pointed out in his "Naturalism and Epic Drama," *Essays on Brecht/Theatre and Politics*, ed. Siegfried Mews and Herbert Knust, U. of N. Carolina Press, 1974. Here, Brecht is quoted by Grim, p. 3.)

Most important, what Brecht took from Naturalism was the equation which joined art with science and radical politics. Art was a form of social science, a way of studying and understanding the nature of society. A scientific approach to the study of society inevitably led to socialist conclusions.

Within a common acceptance of this equation, Brecht differed from the Naturalists in the stage of the scientific process he valued. Like them, he accepted a positivist account of science, but where they valued the moment of observation, he valued the moment of experiment. For Brecht works of art were effectively experiments. They offered models of the world for critical testing on the part of their audiences. Apart from this, Brecht basically agreed with the Naturalists in seeing art as providing knowledge of reality in the same way as science.

Lukács couldn't accept this way of joining art to science. For him the way knowledge was gained depended on the area dealt with. The natural world was appropriately studied through the methods of positivist science (observation, quantification, experiment). Knowledge of the social world was to be gained differently by way of *Geisteswissenschaft*, a method of imaginative reconstruction, sympathy and reflection on the phenomena to be understood. Using these methods, "great" artists apprehended the truth of the world and shared it with their audiences.

Both Lukács and Brecht believed that the world should be represented in works of art. Lukács believed that an artist should fully and sympathetically enter into that represented world; Brecht that an artist should remain at some distance from it. But the differences are within a common realist aesthetic and not a fundamental Realist/Anti-Realist opposition.

By uniting art with science, Brecht defined a role for the audience. If a work of art is analogous to an experiment, the audience is analogous to the scientist, who judges whether the experiment is a success or not. In this comparison, however, the audience and the scientist differ in a crucial respect. A scientist comes to the experiment with a critical attitude already built in. Brecht made the opposite assumption about the theatre audience. The task of Epic Theatre is to encourage a critical attitude in the audience.

Theatre as Science is therefore dependent on Theatre as Education. In the broadest sense, Brecht conceived of the theatre as an educational institution. A principal concern was to create the right *conditions for learning*. For Brecht, learning could only take place if a critical attitude existed. This attitude was best produced if the audience was encouraged to remain emotionally uninvolved, detached and relaxed.

As well as dealing with the *conditions for learning*, a political theory must be concerned with the *content of learning*. Brecht was less interested in this. Most often he specified the content in terms of a few generalities — the world is historical and changeable, human beings are not conditioned by fate.

Once the content of learning is acknowledged as an issue, its relation to the conditions of learning needs resolving. Put crudely, do the

conditions guarantee that the right content is learned? In an informative and perceptive essay on Brecht's reception in the United States, David Bathrick argues that the theory and practice of Epic Theatre never resolved this issue:

"On the one hand there is the notion of drama as a play for learning (*Lehrstück*): an emphasis upon the open, tentative and heuristic presentation of ideas; upon learning through involvement, through active, critical, testing participation. The quintessence of 'the play for learning' — Brecht realized this only in theory, never in practice — is the very opposite of 'didactic' for it required that the audience not accept action and character as finished products, but rather as unhewn attitudes and behaviors which must be tested. Opposed to the *Lehrstück* is the drama as *Thesenstück*, as a 'thesis play' which focuses less on questions and more on answers — on final conclusions and ideological premises. These two contradictory dramatic modes co-exist to a greater or lesser extent in all of Brecht's political plays." ("Brecht's Marxism and America," *Essays on Brecht/Theatre and Politics*, p. 213)

The presence of this contradiction is particularly evident in *The Mother*, one of Brecht's more overtly political plays. It dramatizes the making of a communist militant. If the demands of Epic Theatre are taken seriously, the spectator should be critical of this process and free to come to the conclusion that the heroine shouldn't have become a militant. But *The Mother* is presented very sympathetically, and no criticism of her development is built into the drama. Neither the play nor Brecht's reflections on it suggests he wanted to encourage such criticism.

In his discussion Bathrick takes the scene where the communist son tried to explain to his mother the labor theory of value. Pavel says:

"... there is a big difference between whether a table or a factory belongs to you. A table can belong to you. So can a chair. Nobody is hurt by it. Suppose you feel like setting them on a roof: what harm can it do? But when a factory belongs to you, you can hurt hundreds of men with it. In this case you are a man who owns others' tools: and you must use them to get use out of men." (*The Mother*, trans. Lee Baxandall, Evergreen Edition, New York: Grove Press, 1965, p. 62)

Bathrick comments:

"... the main focus of this scene is not on the answers of Pavel but on the hard common sense questions of the mother. 'Why don't you think Mr. Sulnikov should cut the wages he pays you just as he pleases? Is it or isn't it his factory? But what happens when he says he doesn't need you any

longer?" (p. 214)

The critical attitude demanded by Epic Theatre is present in the play at the level of the character of the mother. The audience is clearly not meant to critically detach itself from the character but to identify with her critical attitude. Brecht assumes that the exercise of a critical attitude inevitably leads to the truth. In other words, the conditions of learning and the content of learning are at one. If an audience adopts a critical attitude, it must reach socialist conclusions. This assumption is clearly not borne out in practice. Starting from a critical attitude, people often reach anti-socialist conclusions. Brecht could make the assumption because (a) he identified socialism as a scientific position, and (b) he identified science as a form of critical rationalism. So to be critical was to be scientific was to be socialist.

This position can lead to elitist conclusions — the rule of the rational minority. Brecht took it in a populist direction by seeing the common sense of the proletariat (at least, the militant section of it) as inherently critical. As the attempt to dramatize the labor theory of value in Pavel's speech shows, theory is conceived as a kind of systematic common sense.

Aristotelian drama supports and comforts its bourgeois audiences in their view of a fixed, unchanging world. If Epic Theatre is intended as an antidote to Aristotelian theatre, it needs to reach the same bourgeois audiences.

In his discussions of Epic Theatre, Brecht varies about its intended audience. Sometimes he assumes the audience will be of a mixed class character, and he urges that plays should divide the audience along class lines. Presumably the positive effect of the drama will be on the proletarian sections of the audience. The bourgeois sections can be ignored, or at least left to stew in their own indignation. At other times, he assumes the audience will be primarily proletarian (the essay "The Popular and the Realistic," defines a kind of drama whose only real function is the education of the proletariat). Finally with the *Lehrstück* plays, there are suggestions that the plays will have achieved something worthwhile even if they only educate their performers.

This uncertainty about the social character of the audience was a consequence of Brecht's own development. The basic concept of Epic Theatre was articulated before he became a Marxist. In common with other art movements of the early 1920s, its stance was aggressively anti-bourgeois. Epic plays were directed against the traditional audience for the theatre, the bourgeoisie.

Brecht's espousal of Marxism in the latter part of the 1920s complicated the situation because it posed the issue of Epic Theatre's relation to proletarian audiences. If it could be assumed that such audiences had a similar outlook to that of the bourgeoisie, no difficulties arose. Epic

Theatre would be just as appropriate for proletarian audiences as for bourgeois ones. Brecht never made this assumption. He became involved with the German communist movement when it was active and militant. He saw the movement as the advanced representative of the whole proletariat and his attitude to it was decidedly positive.

His rather uncritical, almost patronizing attitude towards the proletariat has often been criticized. Certainly he credited the proletariat with great aesthetic sophistication:

“There will always be educated persons, connoisseurs of the arts who will step in with, ‘The people won't understand that.’ But the people impatiently shove them aside and comes to terms directly with the artist. There is highly cultured stuff made for minorities, designed to form minorities: the two thousandth transformation of some old hat, the spicing-up of a venerable and now decomposing piece of meat. The proletariat rejects it (‘they've got something to worry about’) with an incredulous, somewhat reflective shake of the head ... When they themselves took to acting and writing they were compellingly original. What was known as ‘agit-prop’ art which a number of second-rate noses were turned up at, was a mine of novel artistic techniques and ways of expression. Magnificent and long-forgotten elements from periods of truly popular art cropped up there, boldly adapted to the new social ends. Daring cuts and compositions, beautiful simplifications (alongside misconceived ones); in all this there was often an astonishing economy and elegance and a fearless eye for complexity. A lot of it may have been primitive, but it was never primitive with the kind of primitivity that affected the supposedly varied psychological portrayals of bourgeois art. The sharp eye of the workers saw through naturalism's superficial representation of reality. When they said in *Fuhrmann Henschel*, ‘That's more than we want to know about it,’ they were in fact wishing they could get a more exact representation of the real social forces operating under the immediately visible surface.” (*Brecht on Theatre*, p. 111)

Given such sophistication, a proletarian audience hardly needs Epic Theatre to provoke it into critical activity. In fact, whenever Brecht discusses the relationship between art and the proletariat, he tends to move away from the notion of a "learning play" towards that of a "thesis play."

The circumstances of Brecht's life made the problem of the audience particularly complicated. During his period of exile he had no long-term relationship with an audience: the audiences his work got were occasional and extremely varied. When he finally established a regular relation with an audience, it was in East Germany in a social and political situation very different from the one Epic theatre was

developed in. Perhaps his groping towards a new concept of theatre, Dialectical Theatre, was recognition of this.

Even if Brecht didn't provide an overall, coherent account of the audience, he was always curious about the effect of his plays. Discussing the way audiences responded to *Mother Courage*, he wrote:

“We felt that the tradeswomen's voluntary and active participation in the war was made clear enough by showing the great distances which she traveled to get into it. From a number of press notices, however, and a lot of discussions ... it appeared that many people see *Courage* as the representative of ‘the little people’ who get ‘caught up’ in the war because ‘there's nothing they can do about it,’ they are ‘powerless in the hands of fate,’ etc. Deep-seated habits lead theatre audiences to pick up on the characters' more emotional utterances and forget all the rest. Business deals are accepted with the same boredom as descriptions of the landscape in a novel... In our discussions war was always cropping up in this way as a timeless abstraction, however hard we might try to present it as the sum of everybody's business operations.” (*Brecht on Theatre*, p. 220)

Brecht explains the play's almost reverse effect to the one intended by suggesting that the audience's traditional prejudices lead it to misunderstand the play. To say this is to make a serious criticism of Epic Theatre. Drama that aims to have an effect on its audiences must take account of the prejudices the audience is likely to bring with it and try to deal with them. This entails, Brecht himself was fond of remarking, “the inflexible rule that the proof of the pudding is the eating.”

It's not self-evident, however, that audiences misunderstood *Mother Courage*. In terms of the economic interests that Brecht claims maintain the war, the heroine is too small and marginal an operator to be representative. The Thirty Years War is one of the least tractable models for a war as a human social phenomenon, the product of economic forces. A war that dragged on for such a long period, was ostensibly fought over religious matters, and was so brutal and devastating surely invited the response that war is some kind of elemental phenomenon which sweeps up all “the little people” caught in its path. The play's organization of time and place supports this response. Although both are specified in the introductory titles to sequences, they are never localized in the dramatic working out of the sequence. Thus the action has a timeless, universal quality supported by the archetypal resonances of the play's title.

If *Mother Courage* is a typical play, then the effect Epic dramas have on their audiences needs scrutiny. It shouldn't simply be assumed that they will have the effect Brecht desired and that if they don't, the audience is at fault.

Brecht's critical rationalist orientation led him to propose that the relation between a play and its audience should be an intellectual one. From the start, this proposal produced a criticism of Epic Theatre that was to become common. If drama has a didactic function, it will necessarily bore audiences because it ignores their demand for entertainment. Since he had a strong commitment to pleasure in art, Brecht was particularly sensitive to such criticism. In his writings, he is constantly preoccupied with the problem of relating theatre's didactic function with its entertainment function.

His starting point was the classical definition of art as education through pleasure. This definition poses the problem of where in the dramatic process the pleasure resides. Brecht's answer was that it resided in the educational function, that there was a pleasure in learning. Such an assimilation of art to education makes it impossible to distinguish between what happens in a theatre and what happens in a school. The difficulty is highlighted in the essay "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction":

"Theatre remains theatre even where it is instructive theatre, and insofar as it is good theatre it will amuse." (*Brecht on Theatre*, p. 73)

Clearly there is something more to theatrical pleasure than instructiveness. In the quotation that something more is "good theatre." But what is it? What makes "good theatre"?

As Brecht grew older, he increasingly stressed the need for pleasure in the theatre. In 1948 he wrote:

"From the first it has been the theatre's business to entertain people, as it also has of all the other arts. It is this business which always gives it its particular dignity; it needs no other passport than fun, but this it has got to have." (*Brecht on Theatre*, p. 180)

Pleasure rather than instruction was given more weight, but Brecht still found it impossible to provide a convincing account of pleasure. Two versions seem to have existed in his mind. The positive version is utilitarian; pleasure gained through understanding and controlling the world. The negative version is "indulgent," sensual pleasures for their own sake and with no justification but hedonism — these pleasures are often specified through drug or culinary metaphors. The two versions exist in a tension throughout his work. If, in his theoretical writings the tension causes him problems, it gives a play like *Galileo* much of its force.

Any theory of pleasure in art needs to deal with emotional response, the way an audience is thrilled, bored, moved, amused, saddened. Brecht's

suspicion of emotional effect made it difficult for him to deal with this kind of response. Initially he was totally hostile to it:

“I aim at an extremely classical, cold, highly intellectual style of performance. I'm not writing for the scum who want to have the cockles of their heart warmed.” (*Brecht on Theatre*, p. 14)

The way his suspicion limits his account of the relation between the play and the audience is well illustrated by the sporting metaphor he was fond of using to describe the relation. In this metaphor, the spectator in the theatre is compared with the spectator at a boxing match. According to Brecht, the boxing spectator observes the fight in a relaxed, critical frame of mind, admiring the boxer's skills, occasionally taking time out for a smoke. But this is a partial description. Completely missing is the emotional involvement of the spectators, their identification with one or other of the boxers, their excitement at the violence.

Brecht became more tolerant of emotional effect as he grew older:

“A creation that more or less renounces empathy need not by any means be an ‘unfeeling’ creation, or one which leaves the spectator's feelings out of account ... A character's piecemeal development (sic) as he initiates more and more relationships with other characters, consolidating or expanding himself in continually new situations, produces a rich and sometimes complicated emotional curve in the spectator, a fusion of feelings and even a conflict between them.” (*Brecht on Theatre*, p. 101)

Despite this tolerance emotional effect was never properly integrated into the overall theory of Epic Theatre.

Brecht's difficulties in this area of pleasure/ emotion ultimately stem from his lack of a psychology of art. His lack of interest in psychology has often been noted. It is certainly striking how little Freud is present in his writing. This absence has been explained in a dubious personal/ political way by Martin Esslin's suggestion that Brecht's Marxism was a rationalist defense against a threatening emotional anarchism. It may be more helpful to see Brecht's attitude toward psychology in the context of those radical art movements like Constructivism and the Neue Sachlichkeit which, in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and the First World War, tried to give art a social function. Mayakovsky, for example, thinks of this function in utilitarian terms when he writes, “Artists are engineers of the soul.”

The psychology that does exist in Brecht's work — a compound of Behaviorism and an admiration for technology — belongs in this context. The inherent mechanism of this psychology makes it difficult to deal with the areas of pleasure and emotion in art.

Brecht's anti-bourgeois attitudes combined with his Marxism to make him want to produce a popular art, an art that wasn't only available to a minority audience but was positively directed at "the broad masses." His concept of popular art was, however, an unstable one. By popular art, he meant centrally something that might be termed "folk art" — the entertainments provided in fairgrounds and beer gardens, traditional ballads, theatre in the *Commedia dell'arte* vein. He learned many of his artistic methods from such art which he identified as part of the Epic theatre tradition. He also took from "folk art" a commitment to art as entertainment, an unpretentious social activity but nevertheless necessary and valuable.

His attitudes to this kind of popular art wasn't uncritical. His rationalism warned him against mystical beliefs about the nature of the "folk" which led into reactionary directions:

“In this the folk or people appears with its immutable characteristics, its time-honored traditions, forms of art, customs and habits, its religiosity, its hereditary enemies, its unconquerable strength and all the rest. A peculiar unity is conjured up of tormentor and tormented, exploiter and exploited, liar and victim ...” (*Brecht on Theatre*, p. 108)

Brecht's positive attitude to "folk" popular art was carried over to the new "mass" popular art — the art produced by media like cinema and radio. Given his enthusiasm for technology, he wasn't inherently suspicious of these new media, as many traditional intellectuals were. Indeed this enthusiasm for technology was the basis for his and Walter Benjamin's first attempts to think about the new media.

Brecht and Benjamin used Marx's concept of the contradictions between the forces and relations of production as a justification for a positive attitude to new art forms like film and radio. The new media were seen as belonging to the forces of production. Their development produced contradictions with the prevailing relations of production out of which forms like Epic theatre were generated.

This position remained a sketchy one. Its great merit was its recognition that the development of artistic forms and of technology might be related. But the discussion of this relationship depended heavily on technological optimism and a tendency to ignore the effects of the relations of production.

Because of its sketchiness Brecht's attitude to mass popular art was vulnerable to immediate developments. By the middle of the 1930s, he was attacking the emergence of the sound film — an attack hardly consistent with a belief in the revolutionary potential of the development of the forces of production.

Brecht's enthusiasm for mass popular art was undermined from two other directions. First there was his awareness that "folk" and "mass" popular art couldn't be totally assimilated. In addition to the kind of art

that was nonnaturalistic, unsentimental and distanced, "mass" popular art also produced work that was naturalistic, sentimental and immediate.

Second, it was undermined by his contact with Hollywood where he was unable to work despite a number of efforts. His essay, "A Little Private Tuition for My Friend, Max Gorelik," forcefully expresses his hostility to Hollywood, making a conventional attack on it as misleading its audiences about reality by creating "certain excitements and emotions." It is ironic that his stay in the United States should have taken him away from mass popular art because in the 1920s, U.S. popular culture was an inspiration for his writing.

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Epic theater and the principles of counter-cinema, page 2 by Alan Lovell

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It is almost impossible to estimate the popularity of Brecht's plays by the obvious measure of the audiences they got. For a variety of reasons his plays weren't put to a substantial test in this respect. Ironically his biggest commercial success, *The Threepenny Opera*, was with bourgeois audiences in the Weimar Republic. If this period is left out of account as predating the complete political articulation of the theory of Epic theatre, the only other period when Brecht had audiences on a regular enough basis to make a judgment of popularity possible was in the German Democratic Republic from the late 1940s on. While his plays undoubtedly had a working class audiences in the GDR, the circumstances (the privileged position of the Berliner Ensemble, the absence of alternative entertainments) make this a special case. His audiences in Western Europe and the United States have been of a minority kind, generally bourgeois, professional and intellectual in social composition.

If the test of the audiences actually gained isn't really applicable, do Brecht's plays have a potential popularity which might either be actualized in the right circumstances or used as a starting point by other artists? Brecht, himself, pointed out that "besides being popular, there is such a thing as becoming popular." On the face of it, Brecht's poetry and plays have an obvious potential in this respect. Of all the art produced within the framework of modernism, his is distinguished by its simplicity and seeming accessibility. It doesn't appear to have the range of cultural reference, ironic elusiveness or shifting perspectives that make the work of artists like Joyce and Eliot the difficult preserve of minorities.

However, Brecht's simplicity and seemingly accessibility should not be taken for granted. He wasn't an artistic freak, a simple man mysteriously gifted with special powers of expression, though in some ways he encouraged such a myth. He was part of the same cultural and artistic complex as other modernist artists. Like other modernist writing his work is infused with an awareness of a wide range of literature. Much of its energy comes from an ironic relationship with previous literature —

the presentation of *The Rise and Fall of Arturo Ui* in the form of Shakespearean drama, for example. Or take the following characterization of a modernist poetic position:

“Verse becomes hard (1) through being concise and paring away all ornamental frills, (2) when, in remaining close to everyday speech it conveys some of the harshness of quotidian reality, (3) when it tends towards concrete objectivity, thus avoiding sentimental effusions, (4) because in rendering what purports to be an accurate account of its subject, it approximates to the scientist's hard methods, his hard observation of detailed fact, (5) when it 'dares to go to the dustbin for its subject,' (6) when it avoids symmetrical, isochronic meters which are branded soft, monotonous and soporific and instead traces its rhythms the rough, irregular contour of things.” (Nathan Zach, "Imagism and Vorticism," in *Modernism*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, London: Penguin, 1974, p. 238)

This is, in fact, a characterization of Imagism but it could just as easily be a characterization of Brecht's poetic outlook.

The point of insisting on Brecht's relation to Modernism is to suggest that the simplicity of his work isn't easily achieved. It's not the simplicity of an artist who can take artistic traditions for granted and achieve a direct relationship with an audience because of a shared cultural and social background. The simplicity has to be worked for, constructed. Like other modernist art, it is the product of a self-conscious act.

Increasingly, Brecht described the quality he was searching for in his art as "Naiveté." Manfred Wekwerth has noted the problem such a search creates:

“The advantage of such discoveries of Brecht's was that they were offbeat. Their use could never be grasped immediately because they appeared to be charging open doors: naiveté is something self-evident. It was only afterwards when we were staging the Commune that the door slammed shut in our face; we had to open it all over again. Only then did we note that we were passing through a door. Naiveté became a problem.” (*Brecht — As They Knew Him*, London: Laurence and Wishart, 1980, p. 150)

The conscious creation of naiveté is a contradiction in terms. Its successful achievement can only be thought of as "pseudo-naiveté" or perhaps, less critically, "faux-naiveté." But if the simplicity of Brecht's work is a deceptive simplicity, if the artistic effect he was after is best described as "faux-naive," how does this affect the accessibility of his work?

From an unsympathetic viewpoint, Theodor Adorno posed the issue very clearly:

“Even Brecht's best work was infected by the deceptions of his commitment. Its language shows how far the underlying poetic subject and its message have moved apart. In an attempt to bridge the gap, Brecht affected the diction of the oppressed. But the doctrine he advocated needs the language of the intellectual. The homeliness and simplicity of his tone is thus a fiction. It betrays itself both by signs of exaggeration and by stylized regression to archaic or provincial forms of expression. It can often be importunate, and ears which have not let themselves be deprived of their native sensitivity cannot help hearing that they are being talked into something. It is usurpation and almost a contempt for victims to speak like this as if the author were one of them.”
(Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," *Aesthetics and Politics*, London: New Left Books, 1977, p. 187)

If Brecht's work was substantially an attempt to dramatize Marxist ideas, then Adorno was right to say that a conceptual ("intellectual") language was needed. But Brecht's work can't simply be seen as the dramatization of existing ideas, an exercise in political propaganda and education (important though these tasks are). As Adorno notes, the fact that the simplicity of the language of the plays and poems is a fabricated simplicity, relates Brecht to the modernist preoccupation with language, to the dilemmas of artists who don't have a language available they can take for granted.

Brecht's work highlights a number of areas for exploration: the audience, aesthetic pleasure, popular art, avant-garde art, and realism. As a theorist, his value is for the questions he asks rather than the solutions he offers in these areas.

The Ideal Brecht constructed in current radical film theory, the Brecht who provides solutions, is a fiction. This isn't necessarily a criticism of the position. At a certain level, everybody creates fictions out of the past in order to come to terms with the present. The substantial issue is how useful the fiction is, how effectively it allows the present situation to be confronted. The main objection to the use currently made of Brecht is that the solutions derived from his work are inadequate. They sidestep the difficulties of contemporary left politics and consequently produce an art and criticism that is politically marginal.

Brecht's position on the audience starts from an anti-bourgeois stance. It depends on identifying the theatre audience as complacent, uncritical and sentimental. This is a familiar account of the character of the bourgeoisie and may be an accurate one for audiences in the Weimar

Republic. Brecht didn't, however, identify the proletarian audience in the same way. He had a strongly positive attitude towards the German working class movement. He was never able to adjust the theory of Epic theatre to this positive identification though his thinking always poses the question of the class composition of the audience.

Current positions implicitly solve the problem by a negative identification of the working class audience (with some acknowledgement of "contradictions" present in it). The proletarian audience can then be united with the bourgeois audience, so that an Epic theatre approach aiming to make audiences dissatisfied, critical and unsentimental is appropriate for both classes. This class unification is often encouraged by a Freudian approach which allows audiences to be treated as if they were classless.

The audience is not only made into a social unity but also identified as passive. This notion of passivity needs scrutinizing because it so obviously draws on traditional criticism of art forms like cinema and television, where visuals are important; "pictures" are seen as inherently demanding a less active response than "print."

The reason for identifying the audience as classless and passive is not hard to find. A major problem for Marxist theory since the end of the Second World War has been to explain why the working class in mature capitalist formations has generally accepted capitalism. Same variant of the "affluent society" thesis referred to at the beginning of this essay has been a pervasive explanation. Simply put, the explanation is that the working class has been bought off, misled, manipulated — principally by the development of the consumption process. This development has led the working class to adopt bourgeois ideas and values.

The variant of the affluent society thesis that has been influential in radical film theory has offered a sophisticated avoidance of the immediate crudities of the "bribed and fooled" account. Influenced by structuralism and psychoanalysis, the formation of political attitudes has been located at deep levels of social life. But despite its sophistication, I don't think this variant of the explanation faces up to the complexities of left politics created by the development of both socialism and capitalism in the 1950s and 60s. The failure of the working class to support revolutionary politics does not need to be explained as an imposed and/or unconscious choice. Revolutionary action isn't something to be lightly entered into, and the period since 1945 has provided some good reasons for not doing so.

Within its own confines, Western capitalism has not proved a decisively unsuccessful social form (though this is almost certainly changing in the late 1970s and early 80s). The consumption goods it has made available, for example, have produced some real gains for large numbers of people.

Whatever their drawbacks, washing machines, cars, frozen foods,

television sets and the rest get rid of much dreary labor and open up many new possibilities. In themselves, they certainly don't provide good reasons for rejecting capitalism. Nor have the examples of socialist forms provided by the major revolutionary social formations, the Soviet Union and China, strengthened attempts to overthrow capitalism.

It is also inaccurate to describe the response of the working class (and other oppressed groups) to the post-Second World War development of capitalism as passive. In terms of social struggle, the period has been marked by substantial activity and militancy on the part of the labor movement and other groups. (In Britain, to take an obvious example, the trade union movement first resisted the attempts by the Labour Government in the late 1960s to restrict its militancy, and then in the early 1970s the miners assisted by other sections of the Labor movement overthrew a Conservative government.) The activity and militancy hasn't been of a uniform kind in all the relevant countries, but none have been immune from it.

The support Althusser's account of ideology gives to the notion of passivity and class unity raises issues of a different order. By insisting that ideology is a necessary component of all social formations, both past and future, Althusser extends the passivity thesis to the whole of human history. From this point of view, the struggle to make people active makers of their own destinies is an impossible one. Perry Anderson's comment is apposite:

“... the transhistorical statute of ideology as the unconscious medium of lived experience means that even in a classless society its systems of errors and delusions would survive to give vital cohesion to the social structure of communist itself. For this structure will be unseen and impermeable to the individuals within it. The Science of Marxism will never coincide with the lived ideas and beliefs of the masses under communism.” (*Considerations on Western Marxism*, London: New Left Books, 1976, p. 84)

Despite Althusser's militant Marxism, the character and centrality of his concept of ideology encourages the unification of the bourgeoisie with the proletariat. Rather than class, the main social division appears to be between those who live within ideology (the mass of people) and those who can escape from it and understand its workings (theorists).

Generally the Althusserian concept of ideology seems to me to have a disabling effect on left ideas, both political and cultural. Ideology has been so emphasized that the attempt to differentiate it proved increasingly difficult. The differentiating concept of science collapsed under critical pressure and failed to provide an analytical grip. Increasingly it has come to play the role of phlogiston in nineteenth century chemical theory, the unidentifiable gas that conveniently accounts for all the difficult problems. To be useful, the concept of

ideology needs to be much more precisely delimited.

These criticisms of the unification of the working class with the bourgeoisie shouldn't be taken to mean that class divisions are the same as they were when Marxism was first developed a hundred years ago. The work contemporary Marxists have done on the social impact of technological change (e.g., the decline of the traditional heavy industries, computerization) is important and needs to be taken account of by cultural theorists.

Similarly, recent political history has made it all too clear that the working class doesn't have an inherent virtue that frees it from reigning prejudices (racism, chauvinism, religiosity, monarchism, etc.).

There is a real need to meaningfully acknowledge class difference and class struggle. Even if Brecht was sentimental and patronizing in his attitude to the working class, the sentimentality and patronage at least makes an acknowledgement of class difference. Such an acknowledgement is a necessary minimum of any position that wants to maintain contact with Marxism.

Brecht was never able to deal with aesthetic pleasure satisfactorily but was insistent on its importance for art. His concern with pleasure was undoubtedly a positive one. Current positions on aesthetic pleasure have turned that concern into a negative one. The psychoanalytic perspective on aesthetic pleasure conceives of an imaginary (as defined by Jacques Lacan) which too easily conflates with the dominant (bourgeois) ideology. According to this perspective, the pseudo-pleasures offered by most art should be rejected in favor of work and critical activity, i.e., the pleasures of intellectuals.

For all the novelty provided by the Lacanian framework, the attitude to pleasure reveals the age-old suspicion of art as a pleasing delusion, which needs to be replaced by philosophy and the search for truth. It also reveals the same kind of puritanism that produces the attack on washing machines, cars, television sets, etc.. Attempts to suggest positive aesthetic pleasures have generally been vacuous. In this way Brecht's central ambition to use art as a form of "cheerful and militant learning" has been undermined.

Brecht's attitude to popular art, like his attitude to pleasure, was unresolved. But it had a decidedly positive element. An enthusiasm for popular art, however, doesn't mean uncritical acceptance. Any socialist must be concerned with evaluating its power and relating it to capitalism.

Brecht certainly wasn't uncritical. But at the present time it seems important to stress the positive element in his attitude. Suspicion of

mass art is so built into the formation of intellectuals that negative estimates of it are made very easily. This negativism has certainly dogged and handicapped Marxist theorizing about art. Recently it has been particularly strong, given the development of Marxism in a situation where students and intellectuals have been politicized but have been unable to make mass contacts. Such a situation encourages an anti-popular bias. Brecht's enthusiasm for popular art, however incoherent it was, needs to be recalled if radical artists are not to be confined to the safe space of universities and art cinemas and museums.

Brecht wasn't the only artist who found some of his inspiration out of a response to popular art. A range of artists — Leger, the Surrealists, Sartre and many others — have found a similar inspiration. In this connection, it is important to note how strongly mass popular art has been associated with the United States. The set of relations constituted by avant-garde artists, the United States and radical politics urgently needs examination at a time when film theory is trying to come to terms with the celebration of Hollywood bequeathed it by *Cahiers du Cinéma*. The recent reexamination of avant-garde art and politics in the Soviet Union in the 1920s has not sufficiently acknowledged the Soviet fascination with the culture of the United States.

Brecht's enthusiasm for popular art is also salutary in relation to the current rethinking by Marxists of the base/ superstructure relationship and the problems of economic determinism and reductionism. The powerful presence of capitalist forms of organization in the mass arts provides an obvious temptation for economic-determinist explanations of their roles. Though openly avowed explanations of this kind are uncommon in contemporary film writing, the assumption that film industries organized on capitalist lines necessarily and directly serve the interests of capitalism is generally taken for granted.

The way Brecht politically positioned himself as an artist was exemplary. He was aware that neither mass popular art nor avant-garde contexts were satisfactory from a political point of view. He was also aware that important things could be learned from both kinds of art. His interest in avant-garde art (as shown, for example, in his debate with Lukács or his involvement with the Baden-Baden music festival) cannot be used to validate the current state of avant-garde art. He took his distance from the avant-garde as he did from Hollywood.

The politicization of film criticism over the past ten years has frequently meant a move from an uncritical attitude to Hollywood to an uncritical attitude to the avant-garde. At the present time, left film criticism badly needs an analysis of the avant-garde's role in contemporary capitalism, its relation to the state, the use made of it by large capitalist enterprises, its validation by the institutions of higher education. An analysis of the social role of art based on crude or vague concepts like "dominant" or "mainstream" cinema, "Nixon-Paramount," "Hollywood Mosfilm" and support for avant-garde art simply on the basis of its use of "new forms"

doesn't provide a substantial basis for a political account of the cinema. If Brecht's positioning of himself is respected, the old left slogan of "Neither Washington or Moscow" could be adapted to "Neither Hollywood or the Avant-Garde."

Notes

Editor's note: Alan Lovell's analysis of Godard will appear in JUMP CUT 28.

The "Epic Theatre-Counter Cinema" position which I have been criticizing in this essay is presented in numbers of articles in many contemporary film journals. Probably the most accessible source is the two issues of *Screen* centered on Brecht (15:2, Summer 1974; and 16:4, Winter 1975-76).

My own thinking about Brecht has been especially helped by

- *Essays on Brecht/Theatre and Politics*, ed. Siegfried Mews and Herbert Knust, University of North Carolina Press, 1974;
- Julia Lesage, "The Films of Jean-Luc Godard and Their Use of Brechtian Dramatic Theory," Ph.D. Dissertation, Indiana University, 1976, which is especially helpful in situating both Brecht and Godard historically and culturally;
- and Dana Polan, "Brecht and the Politics of Self-Reflexive Cinema," JUMP CUT, no. 17 (April 1978).

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Critical feminist strategems

by Maureen Turim

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SEXUAL STRATEGEMS: THE WORLD OF WOMEN IN FILM. Edited by Patricia Erens. NY: Horizon Press, 1979. hb \$15.00, pb \$8.95.

The seventies was certainly the decade in which feminist theory began to exert an increasingly strong influence over critical thought about film. Patricia Erens' anthology, *Sexual Stratagems* represents the early stages of development of that application of feminist theory to film analysis, the initial strategic moves that feminists tended to make.

Implicit in the statement I just made is the assertion that Erens' anthology is already historically dated. It collects articles from 1973-75 whose premises feminist critics have reworked and extended since that time. In that process, we have developed both a growing body of theoretical issues and ourselves as film viewers, critics, theorists and artists. Those of us who have been following and participating in this history will find Erens' selections familiar pieces, will locate them in that history. And in rereading them together in anthologized form, we will perhaps read them differently than we did at the time of their original publication.

But the book is intended, obviously, as more than just a neat scrapbook for the practitioners of feminist filmmaking and criticism. Like an earlier anthology, *Women and Film: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Karen Kay and Gerald Peary, the book is meant to serve as an introduction. My question: Can anthologies do this effectively? What is the role of editor as critical commentator and analyst in aiding a series of disparate and historically situated writing to cohere and best represent the emerging practice of feminist criticism of culture and art?

That is the tough question that Erens faced. The answer she apparently reached was to leave the material raw and loosely affiliated, to draw few sharp contrasts, or raise few evaluative controversies. She has served us in providing an accessible published resource. But it is not one which I could hand over to students of women and film classes or to interested

people outside the field without a great effort at annotation that I wish Erens had included in the book.

In reviewing this book, then, I hope to raise some of the critical questions that I feel are meaningful for the development of feminist theory in the future.

The first question concerns the ways feminist criticism will position itself in relation to film criticism in general. Much of the writing on film, the overwhelming majority of articles, reviews, books, histories, have been written in a popular form. Popular art form invites popular critics to respond in kind. The publishing industry in this country colludes by demanding that its film book selections be mass marketable in a manner in which its literary criticism, for example, need not be. The result is a journalistic style, unfootnoted assertions, historical generalizations that are in the realm of commonplaces rather than research. In an effort not to academicize itself away from its audience, some feminist writing has also sought, for valid political reasons, to avoid male intellectual traditions of argumentation. As a result, some of the early feminist writing came from an amalgam of this journalistic tradition and this politically motivated nonacademic style.

The anthology begins with a selection that epitomizes this form of popular journalism, an article by Marjorie Rosen that first appeared in *Ms. Magazine*, and which derives from her book, *Popcorn Venus*. The book, like Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape*, provides a decade-by-decade overview of the "dominant stereotypes" of women that appear in Hollywood film. While some of Rosen's analysis and research is certainly a major contribution to feminist film history, one can only despair that her writing adopts a "cute," glib style that at best undercuts her observations and at worst makes her a strange participant in the degradation of women. This degradation takes such forms as her labeling the fetishism of large breasts in the fifties as "mammary madness," and discussing Howard Hughes' influence over Jane Russell's career at RKO in the following terms:

"He deliberately photographed her from her cleavage down to her naval and was so obsessed with the Russell anatomy that he engineered a special brassiere to keep her high, wide and handsome."

When a so-called feminist critic resorts to the same sexist language of innuendo and double entendre as male scriptwriters, publicists and directors, she only perpetuates a sexist representation of women. Further, Rosen's history is dependent on the same Hollywood anecdotes and mythic clichés that we have read in other histories and monographs that gently chronicle the U.S. film industry. One has to question the manner in which Rosen treats such actresses as Clara Bow or Ginger Rogers, since it not only is superficial and historically highly questionable, but filled with latent misogyny.

It is my position that the feminist critic/ theorist has a fundamental role

to play in transforming the mode of writing about film. It is a mistake to begin an anthology of feminist criticism with a selection that continues such sexist attitudes in the use of language and the focus of its analysis. I can understand why feminists hoping to reach a larger audience should avoid mimicking the academic excess of scholarly journals of intellectual thought. This can be done by avoiding unnecessary jargon and pretense, and by providing explanations for terminology and difficult theoretical references. The issues of history and theory at stake for feminists merit far more careful consideration than that offered by a popularized style of treatment.

This brings me to a second issue, the use in feminist writing of the term "image." "Image" has become the equivalent of stereotypical presentation. When authors such as Rosen speak of images of women in film, they tend to concentrate on the stereotypes of a period, "distilled" or "extracted" (to borrow Lucy Fischer's interesting terminology in the opening line of her essay in the volume) from many film narratives and many visual framings. The methodological problem at the heart of this practice — differentiation, subtlety — is excluded from the start. We can see how this simplification works in considering Rosen's treatment of Griffith's heroines, in a chapter called "Mary's Curls, Griffith's Girls," in *Popcorn Venus*, the basic assumptions of which are reproduced in Rosen's essay included in *Sexual Stratagems*. She boils down all Griffith's films produced between 1908 and 1925 to a uniform female image, the youthful, helpless, virginal Victorian meant to be worshipped and protected. If any of Griffith's heroines were straining against Victorian traditions, such instances are only embarrassing to the critic seeking the uniformity of this kind of generalized image.

Let us rather accept that film narratives tend to display contradictions that can be analyzed for what they reveal of a period's historical ambivalences. I can illustrate the difference between seeking stereotypes and a more subtle and discriminating approach to film analysis by using an example of one of the Griffith melodramas, TRUEHEART SUSIE, starring Lillian Gish. Though this film is as susceptible as any of the Griffith/ Gish collaborations to being mistakenly read as merely exemplifying the Victorian stereotype of demure and self-sacrificing female, I believe that there is far more confrontation with the necessity of transforming values and styles than such an interpretation can account for.

In TRUE-HEART SUSIE, when the camera slowly and critically tilts down Susie's body, in medium close up, voyeuristically scorning her outdated, modest dress, the little girl image is not being revered — the audience is placed in the position of mocking her lack of modernity. Within the narrative, Susie will have to learn some of the current style in order to survive. She compromisingly adopts artifices and modernization as part of a strategy to compete with women whose fashion-consciousness indicates deceiving flirtatiousness and gold-digging ambitions. Further, the fashionable woman — Susie's "rival — once married, lets her appearance she presents to her husband fall into

the terrible neglect of a sloppy housedress and pincurled and endpapered hair. Susie will reach a "reasonable" maturation of her appearance, never to return to the unfortunate dowdiness of her earlier costume, but despite this coming of age, the film assures us that Susie's heart remains old-fashioned. Even in this short summary analysis, it should be apparent that "image" used in the sense of stereotype cannot adequately account for the ever shifting and internally contradictory imaging of women in film. The validity of the history being produced and the ideological analysis being generated depends on this theoretical principle of significant differences and specific contextual transformations. It is much more interesting to see TRUE-HEART SUSIE as a discourse on the confrontation of certain Victorian principles with an urgency for adaptation to changing values and social conditions. And in this analysis, auteurist and biographical assumptions about Griffith can cloud the historical function of the images as presented in the film.

If close analysis of image and narrative are not a methodological consideration in Rosen's essay, Lucy Fischer's "The Image of Women as Image: The Optical Politics of DAMES" exemplifies the potential of a detailed analysis mindful of historical context. Still, I wonder why Fischer so completely embraces Rosen and Haskell's delineation of film stereotypes as background to her argument. Also, her discussion of fetishism (one of the few instances of psychoanalytic theory represented in the anthology) falls curiously short of exploring all the implications of the "Girl and the Ironing Board" number. In the number, Joan Blondell is portrayed as a laundress, unattached and longing for romance, who escapes her loneliness by fantasizing that the male clothes she is washing belong to a dream lover. She sings and dances with the articles of clothing. Fischer analyzes the segment as portraying a fetishistic relationship to the love object. She then argues that due to the evidence supplied in the Kinsey report of 1953, we can understand fetishism as an overwhelmingly male syndrome, and therefore see this number as an "imposition of a classically male fantasy on the behavior of a female screen persona."

There are several problems with this line of argument. There is a difference between clinical and cultural fetishism. Whereas one might be less likely to find women who need fetishistic objects for sexual arousal than men, that does not mean that women are necessarily less likely to participate in symbolic investments, in which objects stand in for lovers as part of a romantic imaginary. Fischer fails to distinguish a clinical definition of fetishistic disorder (and its greater clinical incidence in the male population) from an extended cultural definition that is appropriate to representation and figurative imagery. Thus she cannot quite get at the ideological statements being made by the scene. The number has strong implications as the representation of "women's work" and "housework" as a labor of love, in that it covers the boring aspect of this labor with the romance of a sexual fantasy. We can see this scene as borrowing from the traditional sexualization of the laundress in art, annexing this depiction for a popular cultural context, and as

prefiguring thousands of television commercials for various laundry products. The question is not one of accuracy of the psychoanalytic formation (do women ever fantasize like this) but rather the use to which the fantasy is being put in the context of its representation. Despite this point of contention, I find Fischer's essay to be one of the most insightful pieces in the volume, since it directly addresses the issues of visual representation in film from a clearly defined feminist perspective.

Of the two selections translated from *Ecran*, Daniel Serceau's "Mizoguchi's Oppressed Women" is entirely thematic, taking no elements of imaging or narrative structuring into account — factors of analysis that cannot be dismissed as irrelevant, as Serceau does when he labels them merely "directing techniques." Gerard Lenne's "Monster and Victim," a study of women in horror films, scratches a surface of imaging and narrative positioning and its psychoanalytic implications in a number of films, but each film is treated summarily. In mentioning, for example, the panther in *ISLAND OF LOST SOULS*, Lenne acknowledges that her active feline seduction contradicts his previous assertion that women in horror films are passive, beautiful victims. But that one line is all the indication the reader gets of the cat woman, she devil, giantess — all the aggressive, sexual images of women which do appear in horror films, which, of course, exhibit their own brand of misogyny.

Molly Haskell's "MADAME DE: A Musical Passage" is finally more enraptured with an aesthetic of lyricism than it is with searching the implications of that mode and vision in a portrait of a woman from a feminist perspective. Chuck Kleinhans' essay on Godard's *TWO OR THREE THINGS I KNOW ABOUT HER*, and Ann Marie Taylor's essay on Solás' *LUCIA*, are nice critical pieces which perhaps should benefit from further theoretical development. But the Brigetta Steen essay on Bergman poses the question of the relation of art to empirical reality in a manner that ignores theories of ideology. This leads Steen to ask the question,

"When Bergman begins to create his own subjective landscape on the screen and to project, through his women characters, his own personal mythos — are we really justified then in evaluating that self-imaginary world by using extrinsic criteria, such as our political convictions or contemporary political views?"

Upon reading this, my dismay over this section of the book, even though it has essays I appreciated, reached its culmination. Whether male- or female-directed, cinematic expression is a cultural form desperately in need of strong methodologies of ideological analysis. Women are one extremely complex issue within this representation and metaphorization, one that should immediately imply a complex imbrication of issues of class, race, social organization, theories of the psyche, pleasure, etc. Despite moments of insightful analysis, this

section only weakly hints at the significance of this critical endeavor (the Kleinhans essay best indicates the necessity and method of ideological critique). The main problem is that the essays collage into a disturbingly contradictory presentation, a confusing collection whose common denominator is the word "woman," but whose vision, biases, style, theoretical presuppositions are not even clearly positioned within a debate. The book merely presents its essays impartially as the "best writing" on the image of women in film history.

Fortunately, the second half of the book is much better, and it coheres as a stronger vision of what constitutes feminist analysis. The three essays, by Claire Johnston, Julia Lesage, and Patricia Erens, which comprise the section, "A Feminist Perspective," do provide an introduction to the range of investigation of feminist film analysis and practice. The section on women filmmakers, including Francois Lacassin's essay on Alice-Guy Blaché, Jay Leyda on Esther Schub, Regina Cornwell on Maya Deren and Germaine Dulac, Ruby Rich on Leni Riefenstahl, and Derek Elley on Mai Zetterling, provides valuable historical research on each of these directors.

Ruby Rich's essay raises complex questions concerning history, ideology and culture. I disagree, however, with the way in which she defines documentary, propaganda, and the causal aspects of ideology. She faults Susan Sontag's "promulgation of a Nazi aesthetic underscoring all of Riefenstahl's films and photographs" by claiming that Sontag

"falls into the Kracauerian trap of inverting cause and effect, so that aesthetics and not economic determinants or political strategies — become the cause of Nazism, a patently absurd notion."

Rich fails to understand that in delineating the fascist aspects of Riefenstahl's aesthetics, Sontag was working on a notion of "visual ideology" very similar to that which Lucy Fischer develops in her article on DAMES. And whereas ideology does not "cause" fascism, it surely is important to fascism's ascendancy and maintenance of control. Manipulating ideology for political and economic purposes was a key part of Nazi strategy. Rich strains in the essay to hold onto the term "documentary" as a more accurate label for TRIUMPH OF THE WILL than "propaganda," but this seems to miss the full historical impact of fascism as a self-conscious controlling power. Later in the same essay, Rich takes a somewhat contradictory tack arguing that the "hypnotic manipulation" of TRIUMPH, its seducing the audience through illusionism and romantic tropes, are

"equally the sins of Hollywood, Moscow, China, India, Egypt, Europe, of everywhere in the world where the notion of representing reality is the basis of cinema and the aim of controlling audience response its foundation of ideology."

So on the one hand, the film is simply a documentary. On the other, it is ideological seduction through the mechanisms of representing reality.

Either argument will serve to neutralize the specifically fascist character of Riefenstahl's work, which ironically Rich delineates superbly in her discussion of the film. That is, the mobilization of romantic traditions, metaphors, images, the storehouse of Germanic art and culture to serve the trope of Hitler as father, as divinely endowed architect of a social structure full of promise and order, masks all the atrocities his regime had already committed and intended to commit.

Regina Cornwell's essay on Maya Deren and Germaine Dulac is the closest the volume comes to addressing the art of women filmmakers whose films depart from the mode of mimetic narrative representation into more highly figurative and non-figurative forms. Since much impressive work has been done on these two filmmakers and on many others since Cornwell wrote this essay, it perhaps has aged more than other selections. Again we confront an issue of method and style, since Cornwell can say, for example, of *THE SEASHELL AND THE CLERGYMAN*, that "its only mark of distinction is that it is considered the first surrealist film." The glib dismissal that replaces analysis does not serve the development of feminist criticism. In fact, any historical analysis of Dulac would necessarily have to consider how debatable it is to place this film in the category "surrealist", especially in light of the complex antagonism that developed between Artaud and Dulac over what theories and expression their collaborative effort represented.

The anthology ends with a section of short critical pieces on various films made by women, including Pam Cook's provocative essay on Dorothy Arzner, Karyn Kay's analysis of Nelly Kaplan's *A VERY CURIOUS GIRL*, and Marsha Kinder's "Reflections on *JEANNE DIELMAN*," that thoughtfully relates Chantal Akerman's film to a tradition of women's fiction.

If I have seemed harsh on this anthology, if I have questioned its right to present itself as "the best thinking" on the "world of women in film," let me reiterate that as a collection of diverse criticism, it serves a purpose. Let me add that its filmography and bibliography are representative of a sincere effort to analyze the historical repression of women through representation and to make the efforts of women filmmakers known.

Let me, in the style of the essays beginning Part Two of this book, account for some of the strides feminists have made in film analysis and in filmmaking, and indicate directions for future concern.

History — film history and the history of women, cultural history — we are learning how difficult it is to do, how important. We are learning methodologies and theories which transform the kinds of statements we make, the way in which we make them. How does one take apart representation in a film for its historical and ideological meanings? Films make direct statements about women and work, motherhood, aging, power through sexuality, power through nurturing, the family, education, class relations. But so much of the communication is indirect, gestural, situational, embedded in the rhythms of the image, and the lighting. Readings become multiple, the narrative is trying to contain, to

legitimize a given dictum. The film is performing, whispering a contradictory message, perhaps only because a given actress is brilliant and strong, perhaps because a contradiction within the society is forcing its way into manifestation in some abbreviated, nearly disguised form.

Theoretically this means that one must recognize some very complex layerings of meanings on conscious and unconscious levels for both the makers and audience. Julia Lesage's outline for a methodology of feminist analysis is fine as far as it goes. But it is evident that in practice, the history and criticism in this volume can follow the general conception in that piece and still produce flat, one-dimensional history, an analysis dependent on only the most obvious line of the narrative, the most immediate reaction to the image.

Few pieces in *Sexual Stratagems* discuss the specifics of production and audience; few pieces are specific about social/historical milieu or referencing. But more recent feminist writing is placing the act of analysis in a more developed theoretical methodology. Most of it is as yet unpublished. There are several recent dissertations, for example, that concern themselves with the depiction of women during the forties. Diane Waldman has written on women in gothic films of that period, Michael Renov on the representation of women in Hollywood films of 1942 and 1943, and Fina Bathrick on the ideologies surrounding the reestablishment of the woman's sphere in post-WWII culture, by examining films prior to and during that postwar period. The methodology and depth of cultural research in such studies is exemplary. Other notable studies include two dissertations on French films of the twenties by Sandy Flitteman and Wendy Dozeretz, each of which integrates a feminist analysis into new historical research and innovative textual analysis. Let me also cite recent articles and conference presentations by Teresa de Lauretis, Kadjia Silverman, Pat Mellencamp, Judith Mayne, Mary Ann Doane and myself, as exploring the theoretical issues of female spectatorship and identification. And Ann Kaplan is working on a book that will synthesize and advance much of this material and hopefully provide a text for women-in-film courses to supplement the deficiencies inherent in anthologies.

Let me end by making a plea for more writing — writing which makes explicit its methodology and its critical assumptions, not only on "women" but on ideology and culture, on psychoanalysis and representation, on class and history. As to the criticism of women filmmakers, let's learn to address in writing the meaning and value of work which is abstract, non-narrative or nonrepresentational. Let's also take seriously Claire Johnston's call for a counter-cinema, one that would radically question self-indulgent biography, given to us transparently. Counter-cinema would demand that the feminist search for self, for individual identity, always be presented problematically and not as a goal in itself, as an inroad to bourgeois complacency. More films as well as more writing. More films informed by the critical history we are assembling, by our knowledge of how feminism cuts through psychoanalysis, history, science and art, transforming our approach to

the world. If we use words as expansive as the world of women in film, let them represent a desire for total transformation and improvement of our place, our outlook, our consciousness.

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Critical dialogue **Sexism and class oppression**

by Ira Sohn and Cathy Schwichtenberg

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Sexism and class oppression

by Ira Sohn

There is, of course, no reason for point-by-point agreement among the numerous articles that appear in JUMP CUT. While its contributors speak from a progressive standpoint, they at the same time reflect the considerable ideological diversity of the contemporary U.S. left. Nonetheless, the appearance of sharply contradictory views on certain issues merits some recognition, if only for the purpose of opening up debate on important questions.

At the conclusion of her perceptive analysis (JUMP CUT No. 24/25) of the way in which certain television programs manipulate their audience by means of sexist imagery, Cathy Schwichtenberg, using some of the ideas of Lévi-Strauss, writes:

“... the exchange and trade of the female image continues to shuttle women from one patriarchal construct to another, in the name of progress ... Until women take up the pen, the camera, and the executive position, such media recirculations will continue as a source of patriarchal profit” (p. 16).

This contention is, however, partly opposed by Carol Slingo's analysis of the film *9 TO 5*, which appears in the same issue. Slingo asserts that the oppressiveness of the work situation is *not* attributable to the fact that the vice president who directly administers the situation is male but to the fact that the socioeconomic system is based on an oppressive division of labor which incorporates sexism but at the same time reaches beyond it. For her, one of the film's most objectionable and devious aspects is its suggestion that the miseries of the female workers are attributable to the machinations of one "evil" male boss:

"... *9 TO 5* avoids dealing with institutional repression, the nature of power within the corporation ... and in society ... The answer [to oppressive conditions] is to get rid of that man, paint the walls orange, and be happy" (p. 1).

In the last moments of the film the audience is informed that the vicious vice president has been replaced by Vi, one of the story's three female protagonists, who has been angling for an executive position for years. It is implied that this will produce a much happier state of affairs for the other workers. Slingo takes issue with this, holding both that the very nature of the modern corporation will make it impossible for there to be much humanization of the work situation (not to mention alteration of the wage structure). And the film itself has presented evidence of Vi's determination to dominate the other workers by means of a high position in the company (as indicated by the fantasy sequence in which she and the other two protagonists smile down from the top of a medieval tower on the peasants they have liberated from the corporate dungeon). Slingo is unequivocal here:

"... and while Vi might get stoned with the two women, she would never share her throne with them, nor does she at the end of *9 TO 5*."

In other words, Slingo believes that it is the capitalist organization of society which is responsible for oppression and that, while sexist practices enhance the power of capital over labor, it is not sexism that is the heart of the matter. Schwichtenberg, on the other hand, defines patriarchy as the problem and asserts that the solution consists of women's "taking up the executive position."

This writer agrees with Slingo and believes that oppression, sexual and otherwise, is systemic and operates independently of the individuals who occupy particular positions within the system. If this is correct, then Schwichtenberg is wrong on two counts. First of all, the system will not allow more than a few women to occupy positions of authority — precisely for the purpose of maintaining the sexist structure. And secondly, even if there were more than token representation, the oppression would continue, whether or not the sexual component was still as significant as it now is. Male capitalists, it must be noted in this connection, have never been reluctant to exploit male workers because they were of the same sex nor have Anglo capitalists been deterred from exploiting Anglo workers because there were of the same race.

This analytic difference between Schwichtenberg and Slingo is not a mere theoretical squabble; each approach has clear programmatic consequences. Those who share Schwichtenberg's perspective would have to take the capitalist arrangement of society as a given and fight to improve woman's situation within that arrangement, for instance by supporting the efforts of a few women to attain high-level professional and managerial posts while accepting the existence of a division of labor that keeps the great majority of female — and male — workers doing low-paid, degrading labor under the thumb of the powerful executives,

male and female. Those who agree with Slingo would, while combating the many manifestations of sexism, work to abolish the whole social order under the assumption that neither sexism nor any of the myriad other forms of oppression can even be much dented, not to say eliminated, without altogether altering the economic basis of that social order.

Schwichtenberg's own description of the television industry strongly suggests that sexism cannot be reformed away. At great length, she shows how a television program is tailored to the most demeaning sexist specifications by the males who control the industry, that is, the broadcasting, producing, sponsoring, and advertising companies. Given the chauvinist males' attentiveness to sexist detail, and given their power over the television industry, what chance have militantly feminist women — or even men, for that matter — to make inroads of the sort Schwichtenberg has in mind? One might as well request a shark to part with a few of its teeth. The vigilant male chauvinists who run the television industry (as well as the rest of the society) — and Schwichtenberg is correct in her assessment of their thoroughness — will admit a handful of women into their ranks only after assuring themselves that these women will collaborate with them in perpetuating the present state of affairs. The female quislings, then, will not be eliminating the shark but only joining it, becoming some of its teeth.

[Margaret Thatcher constitutes an excellent example of the species. Another, closer to home, is provided by the chief government officials of the city of San Jose, California. According to the *Los Angeles Times* (6 July 1981, part I, p. 5), "City workers in San Jose walked off their jobs Sunday in an unprecedented strike over the issue of giving women the same pay as men for comparable work." The government leaders have so far rejected the demand of the union, half of whose members are women, to narrow the considerable wage gap between the sexes. The mayor of the city of San Jose is female, as are the majority of the city council.]

From the standpoint of those being mauled by the beast, it is irrelevant that several of those administering the mauling happen to be female. The object, it would seem, is to get rid of the monster rather than change the gender of some of its components.

Schwichtenberg, it is true, speaks of patriarchal profit, thereby implying that both capitalism and sexism are the culprits, but her practical recommendation is to single the latter out for elimination, thus vitiating the valuable critique she has made of the former. Experience indicates, however, that none of the indignities visited on people by virtue of their sex, race, religion, or nationality will be ended unless the indignity that stems from class is ended also. Fixing on one of the indignities, without seeking the abolition of that which flows from the present distribution of property, inadvertently plays into the hands of those property owners who rule the system and who preserve that rule by acceding to demands that ignore the larger picture for the sake of minute reformist gains.

Reforms are to be fought for and, when won, cherished, but they must not be mistaken for comprehensive victory.

Women and power relations by Cathy Schwichtenberg

Ira Sohn, in his response to my article and Carol Slingo's article (JUMP CUT No. 24/25), raises two issues crucial to socialist feminism. First, he addresses what he sees as a contradiction between the two articles as to the source of oppression (for me, patriarchy; for Carol, the capitalist organization of society), and, second, he outlines the consequences of each position, which carries with it implied strategies.

While I can only answer for myself, I do not see the articles so much in contradiction as complementary — neither one negates the other but rather presents a slightly different emphasis. Ideally, Carol and I benefit from each other's approach. In both articles, we critique a capitalist patriarchal ideology, which is presented in the guise of "progressive" representatives of women. When Carol describes the camera which "assumes Hart's point of view, aiming at Doralee's legs, buttocks, and finally right down her cleavage," she implies the patriarchy which I foreground. When I describe the networks' recirculation of the "Angels" and the power structure implicit in the show, I imply the capitalist social organization Carol foregrounds.

Thus my quibble is not with Carol Slingo but with Mr. Sohn. He concludes that we must choose sides, which implies that patriarchy and capitalism are dichotomous (we never said that). Rather, patriarchy and capitalism are dialectical; they overlap and "feed" one another. Zillah Eisenstein has aptly pointed out that capitalist patriarchy emphasizes the "mutually reinforcing dialectical relationship between capitalist class structure and hierarchical sexual structuring." [\(1\)](#) Capitalism and patriarchy are interdependent even though patriarchy existed in precapitalist societies and operates in postcapitalist societies.

It is no accident that in both *9 TO 5* and *CHARLIE'S ANGELS* the "progressive bait" used to fool viewers and perpetuate women's oppression is women (cardboard cutouts, icons of women). The "evil boss" (whether Charlie or Hart) is not the source of oppression, but the source can be located in male supremacy, which dialectically informs the capitalist social structure and division of labor. Mr. Sohn's assertion that male capitalists exploit male workers and Anglo capitalists exploit Anglo workers seems to imply a similarity in relation to male capitalists' exploitation of women workers. While the exploitation of women workers is exploitation, nonetheless, it is markedly different in *kind*, which raises the issue of sex/gender. Again, according to Zillah Eisenstein:

"The bourgeoisie as a class profits from the basic arrangement of women's work, while all individual men benefit in terms of labor done for them in the home. For

men, regardless of class, benefit (although differentially) from the system of privileges they acquire within patriarchal society. The system of privileges could not be organized as such if the ideology and structures of male hierarchy were not basic to the society." [\(2\)](#)

Since the power relations between men which subjugate men are markedly different in kind from the power relations between men and women which subjugate women, then the power relations between women would have to be different, too. Although a reactionary film such as *9 TO 5* depicts these power relations as "male-like" (queens to peasants), it purposely avoids the *real* possibility of women organizing collectively to actively change the capitalist patriarchal system which oppresses them all *regardless of position*. It is obvious that media representations of women in power positions such as Margaret Thatcher or the female mayor of San Jose would be used to divide women to perpetuate male supremacy.

I have more faith in women than, perhaps, Mr. Sohn does. I do not see the overthrow of capitalism in the near future, nor do I believe that such an overthrow would necessarily transform patriarchal ideology. In the meantime, I'll stick with the women.

Notes

[1.](#) Zillah R. Eisenstein, "Developing a Theory of Capitalist Patriarchy and Socialist Feminism," in *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, ed. Zillah R. Eisenstein (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979), p. 5.

[2.](#) Ibid., p. 31.

The last word Censorship on public television

by the Editors

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The National Endowment for the Humanities (N.E.H.) and the one for the Arts (N.E.A.), as well as the various state humanities and arts councils which disperse much of the money, are a major source of funding for independent film and video productions. At the same time, these sources, and the major outlet for film and video, public television, directly and indirectly censor work they disagree with politically.

FROM THE ASHES: NICARAGUA TODAY received \$45,600 from the Wisconsin Humanities Committee as part of a grant to the films co-sponsor, the Campus Ministry Group at the University of Wisconsin. After seeing the film on New York's public television station, WNET, the Reagan administration's head of N.E.H., William J. Bennett, denounced it as "unabashed socialist realist propaganda" and declared it should never have received federal funds, because its content and method did not fall within the humanities. We can easily understand this as political censorship. Since the N.E.H. Chairperson does not choose the projects that will be funded, he is clearly trying to intimidate the people who do. He is clearly saying that if local humanities councils fund programs he disagrees with politically, he will withdraw funds from them. When giving statements to the press, Bennett disdained to even define the humanities nor even what specific criteria a project would have to meet in order to qualify for N. E.H. money. His vagueness is part of the intimidation which has had a wide-ranging effect on the timid bureaucracy he heads.

When the leaders of the state humanities councils gathered for a national meeting recently, some criticized Bennett for his pronouncements about FROM THE ASHES, but only on procedural grounds — i.e., how to fund projects and choose them. No one would defend the film (New York Times, May 7, 1982). Furthermore, when Public Television stations presented the film after Bennett's statements to the press, they surrounded it with panels and commentators that were to explain its errors. In the Midwest, the film was followed by a

lengthy denunciation from conservative journalist Georgie Anne Geyer, whose newspaper columns always take the State Department line. Like Alexander Haig, she asserted that there are human rights violations in Nicaragua which the film did not deal with, but she did not offer any proof. Nor did she discuss worse violations inflicted by the numerous third world dictatorships our government supports, nor the consistent human rights violations stemming from institutionalized racism in the United States. If a film merely wishes to delineate some of the gains achieved under a socialist regime, that makes it biased in a way that Public Television feels needs a counterbalance — a kind of counterbalance provided for none of its other documentary programs.

In New York, WNET circumscribed in an even worse way its presentation of Obie Benz's *AMERICAS IN TRANSITION*, a film which depicts the historical pattern of U.S. military intervention in Latin America. Before the film was shown, the moderator, Robert Kaiser of the *Washington Post*, warned viewers that the film was one-sided and factually flawed, and that the panel afterward would provide a necessary corrective. Speaking afterward were two people from foreign policy think tanks allied with the federal government: Robert Leiken, a staff associate with Georgetown's Center for Strategic and International Studies, and Susan Purcell, of the Council on Foreign Relations. Also speaking was Karl Meyer, an editorial writer for the *New York Times*. Meyer said that Benz was well-intentioned but naive to think that his film presented the truth. Purcell said the film should have focused on U.S.-Latin American foreign policy successes in Argentina, Panama, Brazil, and Chile! People talked on the panel about Nicaragua as a totalitarian state, again without proof, and cited as a factual error the film's statement that U.S. military aid goes to Guatemala. The panelists pointed out that since Congress has never authorized military aid to Guatemala, only "humanitarian" aid can officially go there.

Public Television, which uses many N.E.H. funded documentaries and is itself funded by the U.S. government (see *JUMP CUT*, No. 22), has held up showing many public issue documentaries made during the Carter administration. According to *Mother Jones* (July 1, 1982), Public Television refused to show Howard Petrick's *THE CASE OF THE LEGLESS VETERAN*, JAMES KUTCHER because it had too much in it about the socialist political history of a veteran who was fired for political reasons, and Susanna Styron's *IN OUR OWN BACKYARDS*, a film about uranium mining. Public Television similarly moved away from prime time a film about U.S. foreign policy in the Western Sahara, *BLOOD AND SAND*, produced by Sharon Sopher.

Although independent filmmakers legitimately hope Public Television will provide a way for their work to be seen by a larger public, they must understand the interconnections of federal funding between N.E.H., N.E.A., the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (C.P.B.), the Public Broadcasting System (P.B.S. — which actually buys and markets programs to the various stations), and the many individual public television stations. Such an interrelation means that the general timidity

and fear felt by these agencies during the Reagan administration is affecting the television distribution of films and videotapes on radical topics.

For this reason, it is vital that we support the distribution of such works through alternative media networks, and, in the case of films on Central America, through local solidarity groups working in support of Nicaragua and El Salvador. Many of these groups buy a print of a film, slide show, or tape. The discussion after these presentations provides a whole different experience than seeing the same film on television.

JUMP CUT is committed to building an alternative media culture in the United States. In the meantime, however, we must assert the rights of freedom of expression for radical filmmakers, and protest the overt censorship of their work. Letters should be sent to William J. Bennett, Chairperson, N.E.H., 806 15th Street, NW, Washington, D.C., 20506 and to your Congress persons about FROM THE ASHES and Bennett's overt efforts to censor the arts.

Letters should also be sent to Robben W. Fleming, President, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 1111 16th Street, NW, Washington, D.C., 20036; and to Lawrence K. Grossman, President, Public Broadcasting System, 475 L'Enfant Plaza W., Southwest Washington, D.C., 20024; and to your local Public Television station. Tell them what you want to see and that you don't want them to censor it. All the documentaries listed in this issue can and should be a part of Public Television's regular fare.

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